



HAZURE SKILL

THE GUILD MEMBER WITH
A **WORTHLESS SKILL** IS ACTUALLY
A **LEGENDARY ASSASSIN**

Kennoji

ILLUSTRATION BY
KWKM

6



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THE GUILD MEMBER WITH
A WORTHLESS SKILL IS ACTUALLY
A LEGENDARY ASSASSIN

The legends that once made up the party of heroes.

Serafin Mariad

A cleric also referred to as the Saint of Protection. Roland's former party member.

Elvie Elk Haydence

Daughter of a marquis of the Holy Land of Rubens. A paladin. Roland's former party member.

Roland Argan

A one-armed assassin who ended the war between humans and demons.

Lina

A young mage with extraordinary powers and talent. Roland's former party member.

Almelia Felind

Felind Kingdom's first princess and the hero. Roland's former party member.

The World's Greatest Worthless Skill Is Actually a
Legendary Assassin

Rila's voice sounded somewhat jovial.

“You may need to accompany me to Hell.”

“Only if someone realizes ‘I’m’ responsible.”



❖
Rileyla Diakitep
❖

A demon woman who used to be the demon lord and is currently Roland's partner. Her nickname is Rila.

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Vol. 6

Kennoji

Translation by Jan Mitsuko Cash

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HAZURE SKILL “KAGE GA USUI” WO MOTSU GUILD SHOKUIN GA, JITSU WA DENSETSU NO
ANSATSUSHA Vol. 6

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Afterword

1

Daily Life After the Return, and Thereafter

I'd learned how to use my left hand for jobs in the past, so I didn't have trouble adjusting to guild work with one arm. The only issue was that I couldn't hold as many documents.

"Mr. Roland, would you like help eating?" Milia asked every time lunch rolled around.

"No, thank you. I should be able to manage with my left hand. Thank you for your concern."

"R-really?" Milia looked somewhat disappointed.

The Welger Company and a Felind aristocrat named Barbatos Guerrera had conspired to take over the Duchy of Bardenhawk. They had supported each other while the Welger Company attempted to take control of the duchy and Barbatos schemed to overthrow Felind.

Though I managed to foil their plans, when I looked further into the plot, I found that Barbatos had determined Almelia, the hero of Felind, would be his greatest opponent. Amy, the woman who trained me to be an assassin, took a job from Barbatos to kill Almelia, the symbol of peace. Her death would've thrown the world into chaos. Knowing this, I went to great lengths to stop Amy. Fortunately, risking my life by challenging her proved worthwhile. Losing an arm to stop her was a comparatively small sacrifice.

However, this gave rise to another incident. The collar holding back Rila's mana broke. Luckily, despite her being the demon lord, her mana didn't have a negative effect on normal humans, so Rila was able to continue living with me.

Unfortunately, her freed mana would likely attract other demons who sought to use her power. We needed to mend the collar quickly.

Despite all the behind-the-scenes complications, the true reason I went to

Bardenhawk—the broadscale quest—concluded without issue. The adventurers who came along to tackle the other country’s quests and the guild personnel I selected were compensated for their efforts. The adventurers received an amount that fit their achievements in Bardenhawk, and the employees received equal preset payments.

Neal and his young friend Roger returned and were doing well, but many other adventurers stayed behind. Some were Bardenhawk natives, while others found purpose in assisting the nation rebuild. Some even fell in love while abroad. It seemed they’d all found their place and were starting their own lives there.

When Dey and Ravi stopped by the guild, I realized I hadn’t told them what happened to my arm.

My physical state surprised Dey, but she spoke with a joking tone. “My oh my—if you’d died, we could have lived together forever as undead partners.”

She cast me a seductive look, and I replied with a strained grin.

“And who would perform the necromancy spell for me?”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? Lord Rileyla.”

It was a risky idea, to say the least, but Dey didn’t look particularly serious.

I really couldn’t tell how much of it was a joke, though.

“Roland...is my teacher a bad person?”

Amy was the one who had taught Ravi how to use her skill.

“She’s not,” I said. “But her interests and work have collided in an unfortunate way.”

Amy should have backed off the moment her client Barbatos died. Instead, she pursued Almelia anyway. I could only imagine she was spurred on by curiosity and a personal interest in testing herself against a powerful opponent.

She’d been an assassin for much longer than me. Perhaps she’d grown bored of the job’s routines. I might have ended up the same way had I continued on that path.

“So she’s stronger than the hero...,” Ravi said.

“But Master Roland was sooo much stronger than her,” Dey interjected.

“You’re right!” Ravi looked at me, eyes glittering with surprise and respect. She almost seemed like Dey’s younger sister.

“Dey, I’d like to fix Rila’s collar. Do you have any leads?”

“Riiight...” She stared into the air as though in contemplation. “Maybe... Nope, I’ve got nothing. May I visit to take a peek at the item in question?”

“Yes. I’d appreciate it.”

“Oh, Master Roland. I can’t believe you’d collar her... You’re such a sadist... You send shivers down my spine...”

Ravi tilted her head, puzzled, when she saw Dey shudder.

“What does that mean? What’s a sadist?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“I’d like you to collar and do horrid things to *me*, too...,” Dey whispered, looking positively enraptured as she let out a sigh.

Ravi looked between us and held up both her arms.

“Roland! You can’t do anything mean to Dey!”

“Just keep your nose out of this, kiddo. You’re throwing a wrench into what we’ve got going,” Dey said.

I exhaled quietly to myself. “Rila said it’s fine to collar her.”

“Oh my, my, my...! Oh my! What will I do with Lord Rileyla now...? She’s all grown up. I sooo look forward to seeing her.” Dey smiled ominously, stood, and did an about-face. She seemed in curiously high spirits.

If I remembered correctly, Roje was coming by today. I hoped they wouldn’t fight.

As we watched Dey leave the guild, Ravi asked, “What does Dey do during the night?”

“She fulfills quests.”

“I know that much...”

“When someone is assigned to protect an important person, they naturally have to watch them at all hours, which is pretty exhausting. Dey is well suited to taking over the night shifts, and the daytime bodyguards can rest easy knowing she’s on the job.”

“She usually leaves after we eat dinner and then is in the bed next to mine by the time I wake up in the morning...”

Dey’s jobs could get complicated, so she probably kept the details from Ravi.

“Dey is a rare one. I feel relieved to know someone like you is around to protect her during the day.”

“W-was that praise?!”

“For your *skill*, yes,” I replied.

“Meanie.” Ravi stuck out her tongue at me.

“Did you want to see Amy...? I mean, your teacher?”

“I’m not sure. I do, but she probably doesn’t remember me...”

“I see.”

The same person taught Ravi and me how to fight. In a sense, we were like schoolmates. I didn’t know how long Ravi had been Amy’s pupil, but there was a chance our teacher only stuck around as long as necessary to copy Ravi’s useful skill.

A whole two months had passed since our fight, and Amy still showed no signs of waking.

“I’ll let you know if anything changes,” I said.

Ravi nodded. “Sure, thank you.”

“Dey received her reward for the broadscale quest, so she should be set for a while. What about you?”

“Well, I... My skill is what it is, so I can’t work alone...”

Although Ravi paired up with Dey on jobs, each one was recorded as Dey’s

success, so Ravi was still an E-rank adventurer.

Force Field was a handy ability, but Ravi undoubtedly felt uneasy operating alone, knowing that creating barriers was all she could do. She protected Dey, but in a sense, Dey protected her, too.

Regardless, this girl pulled a “winner” as far as skills went. With enough practical experience, she’d find more uses for it. Most mages believed that defensive magic was beneath them. They operated under the ill-conceived notion that simplistic protective spells weren’t worth learning and their time was better invested elsewhere.

In actuality, many quests above intermediate level necessitated defensive magic and skills. Considering Ravi’s Force Field could be employed at will, I would’ve liked it if she grew stronger, but...

“Urk, had another close call today...”

“Neal, I think I might’ve experienced some shrinkage.”

“Don’t worry about that, Roger.”

“Wait, does that mean you also...?”

“I’m already pretty large as it is.”

“Neal, I’ll just never compare to you.”

Neal and Roger, the usual duo, returned early.

Evidently, the slaying quest I’d assigned them went much better than anticipated.

“...”

“Something the matter, Roland?”

“Experienced veterans who always come back beaten to a pulp... They’re intermediate in rank...with combat-type skills...”

“Hey, Roland!” Ravi was talking to me, but I was preoccupied with the two returned adventurers.

“Bosssss! We did iiiit!”

Neal held up a scale, proof of victory over an Armored Snake. He and Roger stomped through the crowd in the reception hall.

“When Neal fainted after being flung away by the thing’s tail, I thought we were done for, but somehow, I single-handedly—”

“Hey, don’t make it sound like I didn’t do anything in front of the boss!”

I took the scale and handed it off to an appraiser while the pair bickered.

“Slaying quests sure are exciting.”

“But Neal... We just do what the boss taught us.”

“That’s true, but still...”

Right as the two hit a pause in their conversation, I broke in, “I have a rookie I’d like to entrust to you guys.”

“If it’s coming from you, boss, we can’t say no.”

“You got that right.”

Neither of them hesitated.

I pointed at Neal and Roger. “Ravi, please work with these two for a while.”

“Seriously?”

She looked very unhappy about this. Her mouth twisted, and her eyebrows knit together.

“Oh, I was wondering who you meant. So it’s the little lady then.”

“The one with the defensive skill, right?”

Apparently, Neal and Roger were familiar with her already.

“Ravi,” I continued, “I’d like you to team up with them so you can accrue combat experience during quests.”

“N-no way! They look like oafs, and they reek!”

“Hey, come now. You don’t have to say it out loud.”

The veterans were already giving the rookie a lesson.

“We’d prefer a woman with a full figure over a little brat like you!” said Neal.

“Though I fancy slender gals myself,” Roger added.

I rubbed my temples, trying to hold back a headache.

“Well, I prefer someone like Roland!” Ravi declared.

“Hey! That’s not fair to men! What’s a guy supposed to even say to that?!”

“You guys start shouting the first chance you get, you’re vulgar, and you’ve apparently peed yourselves... Roland has grace. He’s stylish and a gentleman to boot.”

“Listen here, kid! How many times have I got to repeat that it’s unfair to compare anybody to the boss! You little brat!”

While the argument continued, I assembled a row of quest stubs with jobs the trio would likely be able to accomplish.

“Well then. As the three of you will be teaming up...”

“Did you hear a word of what we said?”

“Really now,” I chided Ravi. “These two will be watching over you from now on. So please do something about that attitude.”

“Fiiine...” Ravi pouted. “I don’t actually care. Just make sure to take a bath beforehand. We can talk after.”

“How ’bout I give you a big old hug right here? How’d you like that?!”

“Pervert.”

“I’m glad to see you *embracing* each other,” I quipped.

“Um, boss, that seems like an awfully loose interpretation of what’s going on. Are you sure you aren’t pushing things in the direction you want?”

Roger had noticed my plan. He did seem like the most clever of the bunch.

“Well, I suppose there’s nothing more to do, then. Let’s revisit this tomorrow. It seems the two of you need some rest. You just came back, after all.”

I handed the quest reward to Roger and Neal, then sent them home.

“Ravi.”

“Hmm?”

“You’ll likely need to work with others often due to the nature of your skill. If you continue acting like this...”

“I know... I’m sorry for being so difficult.”

“Well, as long as you’re aware.” I ruffled her hair, and she squinted contentedly. “Dey has things she needs to do alone. She can’t spend all her time with you, so I think this will be an excellent opportunity for you to forge your own independence as an adventurer.”

To make it, Ravi needed the knowledge and experience to survive.

“I could hardly call those two men refined, but they really aren’t bad people.”

“Okay... But I don’t want to be anywhere near them when they wet their pants.”

She had a point.

The house was already bustling when I arrived home. I picked up Roje’s and Dey’s voices in particular, and occasionally Rila’s. I wondered what they could possibly be discussing, and Rila scurried over.

I’d become used to this—the way she made this seem like a real home.

“Welcome back,” she greeted. After checking that no one would see, she pecked me on the cheek.

“Thanks.”

I peered past Rila, and she realized what I was thinking. “Oh, that. Well, it seems Dey has discerned the collar’s origin, which has riled up Roje for unknown reasons.”

“She probably doesn’t like the idea of your powers being taken again.”

“Mayhap,” Rila said with a chuckle.

Rila hadn’t changed in the slightest since losing the collar. I could feel her demon lord mana, but it wasn’t hostile or ominous like during our battle. It was almost as though it had mellowed from us living together.

When we met, she was still the demon lord, but maybe this was her true nature: Rileyla Diakitep’s nature.

Dey and Roje finally noticed me when I headed into the living room.

“Master Roland, welcome home.”

“Already back, human?”

Dey greeted me with a warm smile, while Roje only spared me a fleeting glance. Polar opposites, those two.

The broken collar was on the table.

Serafin, one of the members of the party of heroes, had originally possessed the collar. I held on to it after learning of its effects. Back then, I wasn't able to test the item, so I was dubious of its effects. I never discovered how Serafin came by it, either.

She'd mentioned something about old ruins, but I was pretty sure she also talked about buying it at a deep discount from a clueless vendor. Because of that, I never considered the collar's history, and I hadn't seen Serafin since our group disbanded.



King Randolph mentioned she'd made the castle's wine cellar her personal chambers, but I wasn't sure of that claim's veracity. I never had any pressing business with Serafin, so I didn't bother to seek her out.

Serafin probably heard I was doing well from the others, much like how I heard news about her.

"Dey, did you find out what the collar really is?"

"Yes. About that..."

Just as she was about to explain, Roje snatched the collar. "You needn't repair the thing. Lord Rileyla is now her complete self... Why are you attempting to repair something that will hold back her powers, Candice?"

"Well...she said she wants it. I guess she likes it. Right, Lord Rileyla?"

"Uh, indeed..." Rila, who'd made her way to the living room doorway at some point, answered evasively.

Dey smiled so wide that the corners of her grin all but touched her eyes.

"Regardless of her personal desire...I must put Lord Rileyla's safety first. I implore you, Lord Rileyla, reconsider..."

"Always the serious one, aren't you, Commander Roje."

"Watch your mouth."

"If you're so concerned about her safety, then you know the safest spot in the world for her is at Master Roland's side. Also..." Dey shot Rila a look. "Lord Rileyla wants to stay with Master Roland. We can't trample on her delicate feelings, now, can we?"

Dey's singsong tone made Rila blush bright red. "Guh!"

"Y-you scoundrel! You've made Lord Rileyla embarrassed again!"

"It's all true, though."

"Rila, is it?" I asked.

"Do not ask that directly of the person involved, you oaf!" Roje yelled at me.

Rila turned away from us. "This is a misunderstanding... Turning into a feline

was most convenient once I became accustomed to it...”

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh my, oh my. Lord Rileyla, you simply can’t be honest with yourself. How precious.”

“Urk... My master’s charms know no bounds...!” Roje said.

“Is there a way to create new magic that can fix the collar in the same way you devised a spell to seal Amy’s skill?” I asked Rila.

“Mm-hmm. That is the crux of the issue. It seems the formula within the collar does not originate from the demonic arts.”

“You’re saying it’s of human make?”

Rila shook her head. “Nay. Were it human, I would comprehend the structure. That’s why I had Dey look into it.”

“And it sounds like you recognized it,” I said to Dey.

“I couldn’t tell you for certain at the guild, but after some more research, I’m confident. It resembles a formula from an old charm that vampires use.”

“Lord Rileyla is much more familiar with elven arts than the treacherous ways of the vampi—”

“Hush now, Roje. I am already aware that you oppose repairing the collar.”

“Ugh...” Roje ducked her head at her master’s cold look.

“Admittedly, I’m not too familiar with the charm,” Dey confessed.

“Vampires are essentially demidemons, right?”

“Correct.”

Just as elves, dwarves, and beastpeople were considered demihumans, demons also had offshoot derivations. Among them were the dark elves—Roje had disguised herself as one previously—vampires, fay, avians, undead, and so on.

“Do you think a vampire could fix this, then, Dey?”

“Hmm... I think I’ll need to look into it to say for sure. The collar itself is very old...”

Vampires were distinct from full demons like Rila.

“I believe it is unwise for me to join Dey,” Rila said.

Dey nodded. “You’re probably right.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Although vampires are demidemons, I am the former demon lord. They’re liable to be on guard with the master of all demons about.”

I glanced at Roje. It was possible demons and vampires maintained a relationship similar to that of elves and humans—not all interactions between them were said to be amicable.

“Because vampires live so long, they still have reservations about demons,” Dey explained.

“Dey’s sadism stems from her nature as a vampire. The collar was likely made to that end,” Rila suggested.

“I agree,” Dey said. “That fits in with the history between pure demons and vampires.”

There was clearly more to this, but I didn’t have much insight into it as a human.

“A function that diffuses mana means the collar was probably crafted with demons in mind rather than humans.”

Realizing a certain person was keeping unusually silent, I looked down and saw Roje in the fetal position. She was mumbling incoherently about something.

“I was only thinking of what’s best for Lord Rileyla...”

“So what do you think? If we don’t take action, the devout demon lord worshippers will come to reclaim their ruler, just as Commander Roje did...”

We needed that collar for Rila to continue living as she was.

“Can you manage this alone, Dey?”

“Typically, I’d say yes. But I can’t cast Gate.”

There'd be trouble if Rila went with her. I could go, of course, but...

"Roje, can I count on your assistance? You are the only one capable of this," Rila said before I had a chance to do anything.

The elf's long ears twitched.

"I cannot accompany Dey, and Roland has his work at the guild. And even if he did not, he is recently returned from a hard-fought battle. I do not wish to burden him more on my account."

Roje lifted her head slightly.

"Though I am well aware you do not wish for the collar to be repaired, you are my last hope."

That clinched it.

"As you wish! I, Roje Sandsong, swear on my life that I shall accompany Candice to find a lead for you!"

"That is the Roje I have come to love!"

"My lord! I shall bring you good tidings!"

Roje stood as though she wanted to start immediately, then charged out of the living room.

"Commander Roje, where in the world are you even going?" Dey called after her.

"To wherever there are vampires to be found! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Candice, come with me!"

"You really ought to be following my lead, you know."

Dey also stood and went after Roje.

Now that Rila and I were alone, she made her way to my side of the sofa.

"Are you sure about the collar?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm. The title of demon lord came with a burden much too large. I—I am much happier as I am now..." She blushed, rubbing her knees together.

In my opinion, she had a rougher time handling housework...

“If that’s how you feel, then okay.”

2

The Veterans and the Rookie

“C’mon, don’t make me repeat myself! What’s your rank?”

“I’m an E ranker. Is that a problem?”

Neal and Ravi were facing each other down on the other side of the counter.

“What do you think, Mr. Roger?” I inquired, jumping into the conversation. Roger responded by folding his arms.

“Well,” he began. “I wouldn’t mind doing either. I could go for a D-rank quest or a C one.”

“Heeey! Roger, I thought you were on my side!”

“I am, but...”

While the two men deliberated, Ravi asked, “Roland, you think we can handle a C-rank job, right?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t have arranged for one if I didn’t.”

I had asked Neal and Roger to look over Ravi while she gained real combat experience, and the group met today to choose its first quest from a few options I presented.

“Boss, this is our first time working together, so I’d like us to do a simple D-rank quest...”

“Roland said it’s okay, so I think we should do a C-rank one!”

“See, that’s exactly why rookies fail—because they’re full of themselves!”

Neal did have a point, but just as Ravi had said, I gave them work I knew they could do. Honestly, I didn’t care which they went with.

“Perhaps you were better off as a pair,” I said. “Was handing you a rookie to

look after too much to handle?”

“No, no, no, boss. Just give us a sec.”

“Yeah,” Roger jumped in. “We’ve hit a tiny snag is all...”

I was aware of many parties who constantly bickered but fought well together regardless. Knowing that and recognizing this group was new, I decided to ignore the bit of friction.

Neal and Roger weren’t impressive, but they certainly possessed skill and experience. If Ravi acknowledged that, she’d probably listen to Neal. Unfortunately, they were all acting like any other ill-mannered adventurers.

“Ravi, I won’t be there to give you directions during the quest—they will be, so you need to be able to talk with them and cooperate. Do you understand?”

“Ughh... I know, but...”

Neal and Roger wouldn’t need Ravi’s defense skill in a D-rank quest, but neither of them said that aloud, and they were still willing to take Ravi along. They didn’t even think that was a reason to complain.

Ravi still had a lot to learn as a person, even beyond her abilities. I could go with them, but I knew she would spend the entire quest trying to guess what I was thinking. That would defeat the purpose.

Working as a mage for Barbatos had left Ravi with stubborn pride.

“...”

She had the ultimate defense, but that was all. I arranged quests that would be good for her in the long run.

The trust Neal, Roger, and Ravi needed could be built through years spent as comrades, but it could also be fostered through a mutually shared horrible experience or overcoming death together.

I collected the quest stubs on the counter for the time being.

Roger looked at me anxiously.

“Uh, boss—”

He assumed I was refusing to give them a job, but it was actually the opposite.

“I’m going to give you three a different quest.” Based on their abilities, I was sure they’d clear it. “This is a B ranker. You should give it a shot.”

When I set the single stub on the counter, the mentors and mentee shared a startled look.

“A B-rank job... We hardly ever take those... And we always come back roughed up...”

“H-he’s right, boss. We can’t take Ravi out on something like this when we can’t get along...”

Even Ravi, brimming with overconfidence, seemed slightly troubled by the prospect of a high-level quest.

“R-Roland... I’m not sure about this... It seems dangerous...”

“Dangerous? The only jobs free of danger are F-rank ones. There’s a risk of death on E-rank quests, and frankly, many people don’t come back.”

The trio went silent.

“Can you not handle a B ranker?”

“N-no, we can... Please let us take it, boss.”

“I’ll do whatever Neal thinks is best,” Roger said.

“Then it’s settled.”

I picked up a pen to finish up the process.

“H-hey, wait. Don’t I get a say?” Ravi asked.

“How long are you going to play at being a mage? You’re an E-rank adventurer, a burden. This misconception that you’re special needs to stop,” I stated.

“Guh...” Ravi looked halfway ready to cry.

“B-boss, I think talking like that to a girl, especially a kid, is unnecessary.” Neal tried to defend Ravi, but I quieted him with a raised hand.

“If you’d prefer a different life, then you can move to any town you please and spend your days however you wish. But you don’t have many other options

for earning a living.”

I’d never been so stern with Ravi before, and apparently, that pushed her over the limit. She started crying.

“I’ll do it... I’ll take the quest...”

Roger must have felt sorry for her, because he tried to comfort the girl.

“Boss, you’ve gone too far,” he said.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t be so hard on her.”

“But it’s true,” I insisted.

I gave them the particulars for the quest, finished with preparation, and returned the group’s adventurer permits. When they turned to leave, I gave them a customary, “We’re counting on you.”

Milia was staring at me from her booth next to mine. Undoubtedly she’d seen everything.

“Mr. Roland.”

“Yes?”

Milia smiled as I faced her. “You’re always so kind.”

“...”

I was surprised she saw through my subtle ploy. She typically wasn’t so attentive.

“I’m not at all,” I replied. “I was very stern with her... In fact, I might have gone overboard.”

Milia giggled. “Yeah, maybe. You’ve never been so strict with her before.”

Based on how she acted, she likely knew my intention.

“I’ll be more careful in the future,” I said.

“I don’t think you need to be. It’s a form of kindness, one that’s motivating.”

There was merit to Milia’s words, but it was still better to be more considerate.

Ravi and I had learned the basics of combat from the same teacher. I'd been too soft on her because of her circumstances.

"Oh, but!" Milia clapped her hands together as though she'd remembered something. "I think you should be more strict with other women who come to you. Be sure to make all those other adventurers cry!"

"Most of them have stopped visiting me since I lost my arm," I replied.

"Well...I think you could stand to have even fewer come by to see you..." Milia frowned.

Once a group had three people, politics started to form between the members. The fastest way to settle a dispute was for an external opponent to unite the team.

I'd changed my attitude and scolded Ravi to give the three a commonality, and it worked. Neal and Roger treated Ravi with more kindness than they ever had before.

I served as their first foe, and the monster on their B-rank quest would become their second. The three would probably return feeling united in a way they wouldn't have had they only gone off to complete the job.

The three returned sometime after noon.

"Thank you for your work. That was quick."

Felling the monster, an armored beast, had gone much better than I anticipated. That much was easy to deduce based on how Neal, Roger, and Ravi looked.

"Boss...Ravi's skill got us through the fight unharmed."

The girl in question stood behind her two mentors, looking embarrassed.

"She invoked her shield so quickly, even after already using it. Plus, she could expand and shrink the shield with ease. Her skill's super convenient," Roger said, praising her. "I'm kind of on the fence about whether we deserve to keep her around. With a skill like that..."

"W-well, i-it's just the skill I happen to have. Besides, my role's about protecting you guys."

Ravi's haughtiness was crumbling before my very eyes.

"I thought this would be impossible for us, but we finished the quest quicker than usual, and it wasn't even a close call," Roger said.

"Owing to all your experience, I'm sure," I replied.

This time, it was Neal and Roger's turn to smile out of embarrassment.

Neal laughed loudly. "If the two of us had been alone, we might've peed ourselves again."

I took the pieces of the shell they'd returned with, proof they'd done the job, and gave them to an appraiser. While I filled out some paperwork, I overheard Neal and Roger whispering.

"Hey, Ravi."

"Ravi, this is your chance."

"I—I know..."

The girl stepped in front of her two party mates.

"Roland, thanks for scolding me."

"What are you talking about?" I kept my head down and continued writing.

"At first, I was like 'I hate Roland!' but then I realized you said all that stuff because you care about me."

"I simply don't have the patience for children who expect to be pandered to."

An appraiser returned to hand me a slip of paper, and I looked it over. There were no issues with the proof of slaying the group brought in.

"What did you think of your two veteran partners?" I asked.

"I can really depend on both of them. We even figured out beforehand when it was best for me to use my skill during a fight. The old guys were pretty strong, I'd say!"

""Old guys...?""

The two behind Ravi seemed baffled and displeased with the title.

Building trust was crucial for them to accept each other.

“Looks like you’ll be in the old guys’ care for the foreseeable future,” I remarked.

“Yeah. Guess so.”

I handed over the reward, which Neal divided between himself, Roger, and Ravi.

“Huh? Is my share smaller?”

“It’s not. That’s the normal pay an E ranker would get. Don’t complain.”

“Seriously?” Ravi exclaimed in displeasure. However, it didn’t seem like she was all that upset.

“We’ll be back tomorrow, Roland!” she said, leaving the guild with a smile.

Dey and Roje came home late at night.

“Welcome back,” Rila said to them.

“Lord Rileyla! I, Roje Sandsong, have returned from my journey!”

“You’re so dramatic, Commander Roje.”

Their conversation got louder as they moved from the entrance to inside.

“So did you find anyone who might be able to fix the collar?”

“Right, about that...”

The girls entered the living room mid-conversation.

“Master Roland! Your beloved Dey is back!”

She hurried over to where I was relaxing on the sofa and clung to me. Rila watched with a dissatisfied expression.

“Move aside,” she commanded. “That is my seat.”

“Oh, come on. Just let me have it for a little while. Can’t I, Master Roland?”

I nearly replied with *You can sit anywhere you like as far as I’m concerned*, but Rila wouldn’t agree with that, so I kept quiet. Animosity shone in Rila’s eyes as she stared a hole into Dey. Whether the vampire noticed or didn’t, she remained glued to me.

“Dey, move over and give us the report.”

“Aww! But I just got back!”

At this rate, I’d lose a competent adventurer, so I pushed Dey aside. Rila immediately jumped between us.

“*Ahem*. Now let us hear what you have found,” she said.

“Ugh, seriously.” Dey looked disappointed, but took a seat on the sofa opposite mine.

Roje knelt on one knee next to the vampire and recounted the details of the search.

“To seek one who could repair the collar, we journeyed to the vampire city of Arzal.”

I’d never heard of that place before.

“Arzal... Are you from there, Dey?”

“Yes. Actually, most vampires live there. It’s a super gloomy place where the sun never shines.”

“Arzal is a subterranean city in Hell. Demons cannot fathom the circumstances, climate, or customs of such a place, so it operates autonomously,” Rila added.

It resembled how humans viewed the forests where the elves lived.

“Chasing leads in Arzal led us to the collar’s creator. Unfortunately, they are no longer in the city and haven’t returned in many years...”

Dey picked up where Roje trailed off. “Once I learned the creator’s name, it all made sense. He’s famous for being a real eccentric.”

“What’s his name?”

“Wawok Seiv. He had some anti-pure-demon sentiments, and it seems he developed the collar as a result.”

Wawok Seiv...?

Another name I was unfamiliar with.

“He’s supposed to be an astute problem solver, but he went down a rather unpleasant path.”

“That name is familiar to me,” said Rila. “I asked for his assistance in developing weaponry once, but he turned me away. That certainly seems in line with his alleged anti-demon ideology.”

“But wasn’t there a vampire force in the demon lord’s army?”

“Not all vampires are against pure demons. I’m not on the pro or anti side.”

“We recruited vampires because we required soldiers for the war. We sought troops from several races, but were careful not to draft any.”

“In other words, you collected all those willing to fight for Hell.”

“Indeed.”

Had the human side known that during the war, I’m sure it would’ve joined with the members of the anti-pure-demon group—the antis, as Dey called them.

“Did you find anyone else capable of repairing the collar?” I asked.

Roje shook her head. “It seems that Wawok made it on his own. We asked several people capable of understanding the formula for help, but none of them could.”

“Hmm... Then we’ll need to catch him and have him fix it or create a new one.”

Unfortunately, we didn’t know where this Wawok person was... All we’d learned was that he was the maker. There were no further leads to act on. Roje and Dey set their sights on finding Wawok, because it was really the only option. Just like Dey, Wawok would have perpetual youth and life as a vampire. Finding him would depend on how long it had been since anyone last saw him.

“Should I send a letter to Serafin, then?”

“Hmm?” Rila scowled. “You have another woman?”

“No, she’s the cleric from the party of heroes. You should know her.”

“I take it she is your current conquest.”

“No. At least listen to me before passing judgment. I wound up with the collar, but Serafin had it before me. She might know something.”

“Then I approve of contact with her! Mm-hmm.” Rila gave me an exaggerated nod.

While I was doing paperwork in the guild office, Milia asked, “Mr. Roland, how has Miss Prima Donna been doing?”

“She’s fine.”

“I haven’t seen her in a while.”

They met once on the island after Rila’s collar snapped. We had asked Milia about Rila’s mana, but apparently, she didn’t sense it at all.

If this search failed to uncover anything on Wawok, or if it turned out he was untraceable or dead, then Rila would remain in her current state. As long as no one else realized Rila had the same mana as the demon lord, she could continue her normal life. Anyone from Hell who sniffed her out would definitely come to retrieve her, though.

“...”

If it came to that, then I’d...

“Milia, could I borrow you?”

“Oh, of course!”

Milia stood and headed to the counter, where the female coworker who had called her waited.

“Nobody ever told me about it!” someone shouted. The bellow echoed through the entire office. “It’s a D-rank quest. That’s what I prepped for. How was I supposed to handle that when it came out of the blue? Giving my party members healing potions got us through, but if I was one short... I don’t even wanna think about it...”

It was an adventurer who’d come in this morning. There were three others with him then, but now he was alone.

“Hey, you!”

“Y-yes...?”

Evidently, Milia had given him a quest. I saw her shoulders droop, and she ducked down a bit.

“That monster was A rank, if not higher. How could you do this to us?!”

“What?! But...it was a D-rank quest. And I’m sure I explained the danger...”

Our coworker who called Milia over seemed to feel bad for her.

“What happened with Miss Milia?” I asked her.

“There’s no one to blame. From what I understand, something unexpected happened during the quest she picked out. Three of the party members are gravely wounded... I’m not sure how Milia described the job to them, but...”

Milia bowed, yet it hardly placated the furious adventurer.

“You better compensate us for your incompetence!”

“B-but...”

“I’m not getting anywhere talking to you. Get your manager!”

“Y-yes, sir... J-j-j-just one moment...”

Milia turned away and ran to the branch manager’s office, holding back tears.

I had a quick look at the quest stub. “Excuse me...,” I said to the adventurer.

“What?”

“You took on a D-rank quest to exterminate a nest of Killer Bees, and your fellow party members were injured. Correct?”

“Yeah!”

I read through the list of people assigned to the quest and saw that not all of them were suited to a D-rank job.

This angry man was a C ranker, and he seemed to be the leader. One other member was D rank, while the remaining two were E rank.

On the back of the quest stub, there was a memo scribbled in Milia’s bubbly handwriting: *Two members not of suitable rank. Explained the dangers to them.*

“The dangers of your quest were adequately explained to you, and you still suffered injuries. That seems like a normal occurrence.”

“What didja say?!” the adventurer growled out at me.

Some of my colleagues quietly advised me to wait for the branch manager and not throw oil on the fire, but I ignored them. “I mean that you reaped what you sowed.”

“Why don’t you step over this way and say that to my face...?”

His pupils were dilated, and I noticed his veins were bulging.

When I stood and headed over to Milia’s booth along the counter, the man hesitated briefly when he saw I was missing an arm.

“I think it’s unfortunate you came across an unforeseen circumstance during a quest, but you should consider it a lesson in not being overconfident. As many adventurers as there are stars have died the same way.”

“We weren’t overconfident! Who do you think you’re talking to?!”

“Then why did you take lower-ranking adventurers with you on a monster-slaying quest? Your group has two E-rank members, meaning the quest was beyond half of your party. You took the job despite knowing that risk.”

The man fumbled to answer, but swiftly recovered, spit flying from his mouth.

“L-like I said, that only was an issue because the quest wasn’t normal! If things went like the slip described, then—”

“You’re right. But no one’s at fault for an unforeseen incident. You simply had a case of bad luck.”

“Tsk...” The man looked like he wanted to say more, but didn’t.

“We can’t predict irregular occurrences, after all.”

“B-but—”

“You should be glad that your party returned alive. Not every group is so lucky.”

The man sighed as though admitting defeat, then sat down on a chair with a heavy *thump*. “You’re right... I’m sorry for taking it out on people I shouldn’t

have... Would you let the other guild employee know?"

"You can tell her yourself."

Milia had returned and was standing behind me with Iris.

"I'm terribly sorry, miss. I took up your time..."

"I-it's all right," Milia replied. "Perhaps there's more I could've done to help."

"I know this work comes with risks... But I got so complacent that I forgot. I need to reflect on this lesson, like the one-armed fellow said. All things considered, maybe we did get off lucky."

He bobbed his head slightly, then stood and left the guild. The entire office relaxed once he was gone.

Iris smiled a bit mischievously. "And here I was trying to come up with all sorts of clever plans to make him back down."

"I can't thank you enough, Mr. Roland!" Milia said.

"No need. Branch Manager, I'm sorry for intervening without asking."

"That's all right. I could've explained the same thing, but it always sounds more convincing coming from you."

Maybe that was because of my current appearance. I guess some good came from losing an arm.

3

The New Species of Monster and the Underground Chamber, Part I

“Another missing cat...”

Milia read the application slip and hummed to herself before placing it into the inbox for an on-site inspection. She and I were deciding which submitted requests would be approved as actual jobs for adventurers. We’d split the stack of inquiries in half and were working through our respective piles.

“I haven’t seen your cat recently, Mr. Roland. Did something happen to her?” Milia picked up another slip, scanned it, and placed it in the rejection box.

“She’s behaving herself at home.”

“Oh, really? I don’t think she likes me much, but I’d like to hold her next time I see her.”

Come to think of it, Milia still didn’t know the cat was actually Rila.

“It would be nice if she liked you. I don’t want her to scratch you.”

“Aww. She scratches? I wonder what I can do to make her like me...”

I rejected a fight mediator job and took the next slip in my pile.

“...Hmm.”

This one was from a woodcutter. He wanted someone to slay or drive off an unknown monster he’d spotted in the woods while at work. I placed this request in the box for an on-site check-in, then took the next slip. To my surprise, it described a similar kind of situation. Someone else had spotted an unidentified monster in the same forest.

“Mr. Roland, has anything odd happened near the woods lately?”

“Is something wrong?”

“No... It’s just, I’ve seen multiple inquiries about a mystery creature in the same region.”

“I’ve got two stubs describing the same thing.”

Evidently, many people had witnessed this strange beast, and none of them recognized the species. By the time Milia and I finished our stacks, we had a total of eight sightings between us.

“Mr. Roland, can you handle the processing?”

“Sure.”

I took the eight slips to the branch manager’s office.

“Hmm. So you’ve found several requests with the same description... That *is* worrisome.” Iris scowled as she signed the slips and returned them to me. “We’ll need follow-up interviews and an on-site inspection. I’m counting on you.”

“Of course.”

I gathered the reports together and stored them in my breast pocket, then left the guild. Occasionally, a couple of similar inquiries would come in, but rarely had multiples with such consistent accounts arrived so close together—and there were eight of them.

First, I made my way to the woodcutter’s house.

“Thought that blasted thing was a dream at first. It was thiiiis huge.” The man spread his arms to demonstrate.

“Knowing its size could be very helpful,” I said. “Would you judge it to be larger than your home?”

This was a two-story structure, bigger than the average house.

“Well... It was smaller than that, of course... Actually, maybe it *was* about the same size.”

I quickly jotted that down.

“And were there any other features of note?”

“The thing definitely traveled on all fours... But it was startled and ran off quickly. Only saw it that one time...”

“Several others have seen the same creature, so it may be living in the woods.”

“I haven’t been able to go to work since that thing showed up...”

“Well, that’s a given, seeing as the monster is as large as a house.”

“I’m counting on you, sir. I’ll pay the reward, even if it costs me a lot.”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you the exact price for the quest yet, but we’ll look into the matter and speak with the other witnesses. Once that’s done, we’ll formally assign a rank and reward, then consult with you regarding price.”

“Gotcha. I’m counting on you.”

Continuing on that track, I met the other seven individuals and collected their stories. Unfortunately, none of them agreed with the others.

No one but the woodcutter claimed the monster was as large as a house. A few claimed it was closer in size to a horse. One even swore it walked on two legs.

“Why are the reports so different...?”

Upon returning to the guild, I compared all the statements. It seemed we didn’t have one new species of monster on our hands, but a veritable menagerie.

The only common quality was that the monsters were sighted between the evening and dead of night. There were plenty of nocturnal species, so that wasn’t too helpful.

Those who submitted requests for help frequented the woods, whether it was for woodcutting, gathering food, or something else. This mysterious threat put them all out of work; it was a matter of life or death to them. On top of that, there weren’t many quests for that forest, so adventurers didn’t come through the area regularly.

We were nearing closing time when Jita came by the guild. He was a beastperson I once chased through the royal capital. Now he was employed as a

guide and kept new adventurers from losing their way in the woods.

“Jita.”

“Hey, Roland. Is something the matter?”

“Have you heard of any strange occurrences in the woods to the northeast of here?”

“Strange stuff? Hunh... I don’t really go up there, even for work... No one really needs a guide for that place.”

“I see.”

“Oh, but sometimes I feel a creepy presence near there when it starts getting dark. But it’s never tempted me to go in there to check it out. I just pass by.”

“Looks like it’ll be fastest for me to take a look for myself, then.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay? You’ve just got the one arm now.”

“I could throw you all the way to those woods with this single arm, if I wanted to.”

“Urgh... Y-your combat abilities are just as terrifying as ever...”

Jita’s face twitched, then he gave me a summary of the day’s events and headed home not a moment later. After reporting my progress to Iris, I made for the woods with her permission. The workday was over, so I planned to head home once the inspection was over.

When I arrived at the woods, the sky was turning from a shade of red to indigo blue, and tiny stars were emerging.

I found a path that made my trek into the woods easier. Apparently, people were making frequent trips in and out.

A nearby river was likely someone’s source of fresh water, and I spied some stumps and the remnants of edible plants. There were squirrels and rabbits about. Everything seemed like a normal forest.

Suddenly, the chirruping insects went silent, and the small animals made themselves scarce. A heavy *thump* thundered through the woods. Soon after, the odor of spoiled food assailed my nose. It smelled of fermentation.

Something blocked the moonlight filtering through the canopy, plunging everything into darkness.

When I looked in that direction, I saw a monster the size of a house. In all likelihood, this was the one the woodcutter had spoken of.

Its four stumpy legs were thick, and its entire body was covered in what looked like stone. A quartet of four elongated, thread-like eyes extended from what I assumed was a face. It mostly resembled a turtle, but I couldn't remember any variety like this, much less a monstrous one.

One of its eyes opened wide and swiveled in my direction.

"I had only planned to investigate, but now that you've spotted me, I guess I have no choice."

I grabbed a rock at my feet and lobbed it at the eye. It connected, passing through the monster's head.

"Graaaaaaw?!"

The woods shook with the monster's scream.

The creature's size made it powerful, but it was slower for it, too. I could fight it while walking.

Since it trudged along on four legs, I knew that its limbs couldn't be fully armored. That would restrict its movements too much. Its joints were undoubtedly exposed.

I took a random branch and headed around to the monster's back. As I anticipated, the flesh behind what appeared to be its knees was exposed.

I jabbed the branch into the skin there, then did the same to its other three limbs as well.

"Graaaw?! Graaa?!"

Now immobilized, the monster flailed its head around, shrieking.

"I have no ill will toward you, but you've created trouble for many people. You've left their *normal* lives in chaos."

I invoked Magi Raegas and plunged my mana-enveloped left arm into the

monster's head.

Unable to wail, the beast convulsed for some time before expiring.

"Hmm? This thing is..."

Inspecting the corpse revealed writing that looked like a formula.

The glyphs bore a noticeable resemblance to those on Rila's collar.

Once I returned home, I checked the inside of the collar and found that the writing was indeed similar.

"Is something the matter?" Rila had followed me all the way to the living room when I marched inside without a word.

"The formula on the inside of the collar is meant to suppress mana, right?"

"I believe so," Rila answered.

"..."

"Has something happened?"

I told Rila about the unidentified giant monster I encountered in the woods.

"Mm-hmm. So an unknown monster has appeared...and it sports a formula similar to the one on the collar."

"The glyphs were all over its body, not just the one spot," I explained.

"A turtle with four eyes and a body like a boulder... I cannot think of any monsters that fit that description."

I expected untrained individuals to be unfamiliar with certain creatures, but there were few Rila and I didn't know.

"Let's just call it an Armored Turtle for now. It was as large as a house, but only that one woodcutter saw it."

"Then this Armored Turtle, or whatever such name you wish to give it, does not typically seem to dwell in the forest."

"Yeah," I answered.

"Inspecting its body may reveal something. Would you take me to it?"

I agreed and took Rila back to the woods.

“I’m sure it was here...”

No matter where we looked, there was no sign of the Armored Turtle.

“Where did it go...?”

“The blood I smell on you is similar to that nearby. I am sure it should be here,” Rila said.

I didn’t expect to have so much trouble finding such a large monster.

“Finding it should be easy, given how large it was. And since we can’t...”

“You think someone carried it off?”

“Hmm. Very likely.”

Lugging the giant carcass around was no easy feat. Whoever took it probably used magic or a skill. Plus, the Armored Turtle was covered in writing similar to the collar’s, which even Rila couldn’t decipher.

If the glyphs were written in the same language, there was a chance the monster held some connection to Wawok, the one who created the collar. There were reports of mysterious monsters other than the Armored Turtle. Were this a quest, I’d simply dispatch adventurers to slay the monsters as needed. They’d be tough to handle with the unknown element of that indecipherable formula, though. Ultimately, I decided it was better to do this myself, because I wanted some of the creatures alive to observe them and find out where they came from. Perhaps they were the result of a mutation. It was just as likely they were someone’s pets. At the very least, I wanted to narrow down the possibilities.

“I will create a shadow,” Rila said.

“Oh, right. I forgot you could cast that magic.”

“Hmph. What a foolish thing to say. I was the one who taught the spell to you.”

“Right, you did.”

When Rila cast the spell, her mana spread from her.

“Scree!”

She created a shadow about the size of a small dog. Mine always looked vaguely male, but Rila’s was rounder and more feminine in shape. It clung to my leg and then latched on to my torso.

“Wh-what?! St-stop that! What do you think you are doing?!”

Rila grabbed the shadow by the back of its neck in a panic and tugged it away from me, tossing it off into the dark woods.

“I shall have it keep watch here. Should anything happen, I will inform you.”

“All right... It looked different from my shadows. Yours was curvier.”

“Th-that is because...it reflects the caster’s spirit, to a certain extent.”

If that was true, then it clung to me because...

“Dey and Roje won’t be home today...,” Rila whispered.

That explained it.

Eyes downcast, Rila added, “I also prepared supper. A-are you glad? You do so much for me that I wanted to thank you. I do make the occasional attempt...”

I was a little exasperated at her bashfulness. This was supposed to be the greatest demon lord. Still, I gave Rila a strained smile and caressed her head.

“I guess I’ll have to inspect your work.”

“Hmph. You act as though I am beholden to you.”

Rila stared at me, her face still red, until she quickly turned away. “I hope you do not come to regret those words.”

The next day, after the morning meeting, I headed to Iris’s office to report on last night.

“A monster even you didn’t recognize?”

“Yes. There may be more, and it’s possible they’re mutants, so it’s probably best to keep people from going near the woods until we can pinpoint the cause.”

“Yes, that’s a fair point.” Iris tapped on her desk with her index finger and

hummed as she crossed her legs—her point of pride. She usually did this when mulling something over.

“Let’s report this to his lordship and ask if he can issue a decree to make the forest off-limits.”

“That should be a good preventive measure.”

It would bring hardship for any who relied on the woods for their meals, but that was better than being mauled or killed.

“Oh, also, this came in for you. It’s a letter from the capital.”

“Thank you.”

I examined the envelope, thinking it was from King Randolph, but saw “Mr. Roland ≡” written on the stationery. I recalled the enigmatically mischievous grin of a certain individual.

So it’s from her...

I tore the envelope open and extracted the letter inside.

It’s been too long, Mr. Roland.

I’d sent a letter about the collar to Serafin several days ago, and this was her reply.

The missive began with her complaining that I’d already reunited with Almelia, Elvie, and Lina, yet never bothered to pay her a visit. She went on to accuse me of disliking her. I assumed that was a joke, but it went on for so long that I had to skip that section.

Long story short, Serafin knew no more than I did about the collar.

She’d picked it up on the battlefield and later had it assessed by an appraiser before she passed it to me for safekeeping. No sooner had I finished reading Serafin’s letter and pocketed it than I heard a knock against the window.

It was odd, but I dismissed it. Then it happened again. Upon opening the window and looking outside, I saw Rila’s shadow preparing to throw a third pebble. “Pebble” was generous, though. This one was large and would’ve shattered the pane.

"Knave, something has made an appearance."

Rila's voice came from the shadow.

"Was that Rila?" Iris asked from behind me. She sounded confused.

"You can talk now?" I asked her.

"Who do you take me for?"

The shadow laughed loudly for some time.

Yesterday evening, after making such a fuss about telling me I'd regret my words, Rila wound up ruining things herself when she lost her voice by the middle of the night. Thankfully, she'd recovered quickly.

"Using the shadow's vision, I witnessed a monster that resembled a lizard. And the creature was new to my eyes."

"Got it. I'll head to the woods."

"It seems considerably skittish, possibly because of yesterday evening's events. I have been unable to approach it."

I just hoped it had the same master as the other one.

"I will let it continue to move freely, but if it notices our pursuit, that will be the end of it."

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

I left through the window. Iris, having gathered what was going on from the conversation, waved. "Be careful out there."

4

The New Species of Monster and the Underground Chamber, Part II

I left the guild, hurrying to the forest. The shadow Rila sent as a messenger clung to my hip.

“The lizard-like monster I witnessed was only the size of a dog, unlike the Armored Turtle you discovered. It may well have come to the area to find out what happened to the other monster.”

That seemed plausible. There was a chance the two monsters shared a master. If so, then why were they leaving such bizarre monsters to roam the woods?

“Scree, scree.” The shadow pointed as it gave me directions. While running, I spotted another shadow in the hollow of a tree, the one Rila had left behind to survey the forest.

“Scree, scree.” The one in the hollow pointed me in a different direction.

I heard a thud, and the lizard monster Rila described emerged from its hiding spot. Its entire body was covered in quills reminiscent of a hedgehog’s. However, it conducted itself like a lizard and had the tail of one. I decided to call it a Spiny Lizard.

It walked over the old leaves, crunching them underfoot. Occasionally, the Spiny Lizard lowered its snout to the ground as though searching for something. It stood right where I’d defeated the Armored Turtle.

Rila was right. This monster was here to investigate.

The Spiny Lizard climbed up a tree to survey the area. It only had quills along its back, so it could move along its belly without issue. It leaped off a branch and landed, then set out in another direction, tail waving back and forth.

I saw something on its abdomen.

"Rila, did you see that?" I asked the shadow in a hushed voice.

"Indeed. It was only visible for a moment, but yes, there was a formula in a language similar to the collar's on the beast's belly."

"It's likely the same the Armored Turtle had."

"Suggesting they are pets owned by the same individual."

The Spiny Lizard wandered around for a while.

I melted into my surroundings and followed after. The messenger shadow kept close to me, observing on Rila's behalf.

From what I gathered, the Spiny Lizard had completed its search and was leaving the forest.

"Perhaps it is returning to its master."

"Very likely."

A monster that Rila and I couldn't identify was concerning enough, but the idea that the same individual controlled this one and the Armored Turtle was more worrisome.

The Spiny Lizard moved downstream to a small lake linked to the forest by a river. It wasn't too far from Lahti.

After scanning its surroundings, the Spiny Lizard entered the lake.

"It has gone under the water. I suppose this ends our pursuit..."

"That monster wasn't made to live in water. It's likely traveling to another location."

"Following would require us to make adequate preparations."

"That's unnecessary." I took a deep breath and quietly entered the lake.

"Are you sure? You do realize you will be underwater, yes?"

I didn't answer, opting to search for the Spiny Lizard instead.

I'd never seen Rila swim before. Perhaps demons didn't have many opportunities to do so under normal circumstances.

The Spiny Lizard was kicking all four of its limbs to push itself into a dark cavern.

The shadow tugged at my clothes. *“Y-you cannot breathe here, can you?”*

Even I couldn't stay submerged indefinitely. I didn't have gills, after all.

“Y-you'll die. You must return to shore! Quickly now!”

Rila spoke to me as though I could answer her. Maybe she didn't know I couldn't.

I activated Unobtrusive.

No matter how I attempted to conceal myself, I couldn't stop the sounds of my air and movements entirely, which made me easier to notice. I hoped my skill would compensate for that.

The Spiny Lizard, which seemed wholly ignorant of my presence, continued into the cavern. I swam after it for a while until the creature surfaced. Apparently, this grotto was the entrance to another place.

I let my head breach the water, but that was all. Once I confirmed that I felt no other presences around, I pulled myself up at the edge of the cave.

“A-are you truly immortal...?!”

I ignored Rila's astonishment and went after the Spiny Lizard again.

I had to steady my breath as I pushed farther into the cave.

If the master was here, they'd chosen quite an interesting habitat. I wondered how they'd gotten the Armored Turtle in and out of this place. It wouldn't have fit through the passage I went through.

The presence of monsters became evident while I walked.

Finally, the cave opened up to a gigantic underground space. Although blanketed in the dark, I knew this place wasn't empty. Monstrous cries and intermittent roars of magical beasts bounced off the high ceiling. All of the creatures were penned in cages.

“What is this place...?” Rila muttered.

“A hideout for someone using these monsters and beasts,” I said.

The collar's formula had the ability to suppress mana. Controlling various animals and amplifying their mana would be a piece of cake to someone who could accomplish that.

I noticed a human presence amid the many monsters and beasts.

My skill made it nigh impossible for anyone to notice me, especially while the cavern was in darkness. In other words, I had no difficulty blending in.

I wondered who the other person was and whether they were directly involved with this place. Their arrival was perfectly timed. I had questions for them.

"Guh?!"

I caught them by surprise from behind and placed my thumb in such a way that I would be able to crush their throat immediately.

"Wh-what...?! A-an enemy?"

Hmm? That voice...

"I—I simply lost my way..."

"Oh my, oh my. What a terrible lie. Did you think that would really work?"

That was Dey's voice. That's when I realized I had Roje's throat in my hand.

Disappointed, I released Roje and sighed. She collapsed to the ground.

"What are you doing here?" I questioned.

"Y-you bastard...! H-how could you grab my neck with no warning?! Don't you dare do that again!"

"Hush, you foolish elf," Dey scolded. "While gathering information on Wawok's whereabouts, we heard about an underground cave. We came for a teeeny tiny quick little peek."

Evidently, this place *was* related to Wawok in some way.

"Right, Commander Roje?" Dey said.

Roje was still on the ground, trembling. "I—I—I thought I was d-d-dead... That tiny bit of animosity I felt... It was terrifying..."

“It’s your fault for suddenly popping up behind me.”

“Oh, come onnn, Master Roland! You’re being sooo unreasonable!” Dey traced a finger down my torso.

“You should both be grateful you survived.” When Rila spoke through the shadow, Roje immediately jumped to attention.

“Lord Rileyla, everything is going swimmingly. It has been so long since I’ve seen your shadow...”

“Save the sentimentality for later.”

“Yes, Your Greatness.” Roje hugged the shadow as though she believed it were actually part of Rila.

“Dey, have you uncovered anything new?” I asked.

“Yes. We don’t have confirmation that Wawok is here, but rumors suggest someone is conducting research down here beyond the reach of the sun.”

The language of the formulas, development of something new, a cavern safe from daylight... It didn’t seem a stretch to assume it all related to Wawok.

“Ahem.” Roje cleared her throat. “We heard all that at a tavern frequented by adventurers. Supposedly, there is someone experimenting with, and modifying, monsters.”

I nodded. “People with skills that allow them to control monsters would probably love that.”

“If existing species are being modified or new ones developed, it would explain why we failed to identify them.”

From my perspective, stronger monsters were more useful to tamers, which was a positive. If the studies conducted here bore fruit, I wouldn’t mind turning a blind eye. On the other hand, as a guild employee, I had to think of the potential negative ramifications if the monsters proved uncontrollable. In that sense, I couldn’t ignore what was happening here. And the reality was that several people were already worried because of these modified monsters loitering in the woods.

If this resulted in more casualties, it’d increase our workload, as well.

“Shall we put an end to this, then?” I said. “Quickly would be preferable.”

Five monsters were with us in the cavern. Every single one of them was caged, so I’d be able to make swift work of them.

“Wait, human. Finding information related to Wawok should come first.”

“In that case, you can look for him.”

“Hmph. You deign to look down upon me? Candice, let’s begin our search.”

“I’ll help Master Roland. You’re more than welcome to start searching for clues on your own, Commander Roje.”

“Why you little...! You’re nothing but a vampire past her expiration date...!”

“Were I with you, I may well have been able to offer help. As it is, however...”

Dey summoned her bloodsucking spear and readied herself for a fight.

“Dey, let’s go.”

“Okay!”

We divvied up the caged monsters and brought each of them down in turn.

One was a magical beast resembling a lion the worse for wear. A frog-shaped monster was fast asleep. I killed each of them with one blow using my Magi Raegas.

“Hee-hee... I looove killing defenseless foes like this. It’s great when they can’t put up any resistance.”

Dey’s spear hummed as she spun it around and jabbed at the cages. The monsters’ final wails were cut short.

“Roje Sandsong, have you found any clues?”

“I’m still searching! Don’t distract me! Do not talk to me!”

Roje was off away from the cages, inspecting desks lined with containers full of liquid chemicals.

“This does indeed seem like Wawok’s laboratory.”

“How can you tell, Lord Rileyla?”

“The materials on the desk feature the language used in the formula written on the collar.”

“I see.”

“Would you bring this home? I would like to see them firsthand.”

“Yes, Your Greatness.”

After making quick work of the monsters and beasts, I gave each a closer look. Those same glyphs were carved into each of their bodies, and they all wore collars. The creatures matched the descriptions of those seen in the forest.

“Master Roland, this one’s the same. It has a collar and those markings.”

I broke through one of the cages to take a closer look at a collar. Only then did I realize the Spiny Lizard was missing.

“Greeeeeh! Greeeeh!” I heard a monster screech in warning.

Was it the lizard?

“Roje! I feel mana building near you! You must move immediately!”

“Move—huh?”

Mana blasted at Roje from close quarters. I could tell it came from the Spiny Lizard, but the creature possessed more power than I anticipated.

A wave of mana swept everything away, filling the chamber with a bright flash.

“Ahhhh?!” Roje screamed like a child.

“Gwuh!”

Roje was flung away and struck a wall. She slid down on all fours, her rear up in the air and her mouth twisted.

“Roje!!”

That...probably wasn’t enough to really hurt her.

The shadow slapped her backside, but she wasn’t responding. She’d probably fainted.

Once the light and surge of air from the burst of mana died down, there was a

gigantic dragon towering before us.

“Graaaaaaaw!” It let loose a throaty roar and slammed down its tail, which was covered in spines, each the size of a grown person. The ground shook as though we were in the middle of an earthquake.

This dragon didn’t look too different from the Spiny Lizard, excluding its size, of course. Perhaps the Armored Turtle grew, too, and that’s why it was so large.

“M-Master Roland... Is that...?”

“Looks like the lizard turned into a dragon.”

My guess was these monsters transformed in battle.

The Spiny Lizard’s legs had shortened and thickened to become as massive as tree trunks to support its weight. Though it sported small wings, I doubted they were good for flying. It likely used magic or mana to float.

“Grrrrraaw!” it roared, and it glared at me and Dey with eerily small pupils.

“It’s coming...”

“Well, aren’t we the unlucky ones. I can’t believe we’re fighting a dragon.”

The giant creature reared up on its hind legs, then brought down its front two. Dey and I leaped away to avoid being crushed. The ground shook, and we nearly lost balance.

“Graaw!”

The tail whipped toward us with tremendous force, but it moved slowly because of its size.

“There’s no point if you can’t hit us.”

I had no difficulty evading it, while Dey thrust her bloodsucking spear right at the dragon’s front legs.

The tip broke on impact.

“Oh nooo... Seriously?” Dey cast the spear aside and summoned a new one.

Apparently, the dragon’s skin was harder than the spearhead. Magi Raegas probably wouldn’t fare much better. This monster’s hardness was on another

level. Our attacks were nothing more than the sting of an insect.

There was limited space to maneuver in this cavern, and our opponent shared that disadvantage because of its large form.

“Master Roland, I’ll distract it.” Dey attempted to capture the dragon’s attention through her movements. It began to focus strikes on her, attacking with its claws, fangs, and tails.

Close observation revealed the formula on its abdomen was glowing faintly.

“...”

I approached, keeping myself hidden so as not to ruin Dey’s efforts to distract the monster.

I activated my skill, Unobtrusive.

Soon, I was standing directly under the monster’s abdomen. Many creatures had spikes on their backs to protect themselves from threats, so I understood why its resilient skin protected it against the bloodsucking spear and my Magi Raegas. Would the same be true of its underbelly, where it had no quills?

The glowing formula stood out against the dragon’s scaly body.

I invoked Magi Raegas once more.

“How about this?” I thrust my left arm straight into the dragon’s scales.

“Graaaaaaw?!”

After a few swift jabs, the formula’s light grew faint.

“Graaaw...”

The dragon shrunk before my eyes back into its original lizard-like form. The markings must have controlled its transformation.

“*Knave,*” Rila called. “*Look at the collars of the caged monsters! They look much like my own!*”

“I see.”

I raised my hand and signaled to the shadow waving at me that I understood. The master had likely collared the monsters and beasts so their markings didn’t

let them run amok.

“However...all these collars are broken...”

I hurried to join Rila’s shadow by a cage.

She was right—all the collars were snapped.

“No idiot would use an item that doesn’t work. Maybe the formulas were constructed to cease functioning once the monsters died.”

“That makes sense,” Dey said. After abruptly unsummoning her bloodsucking spear, she peered into the cage and nodded several times.

The Spiny Lizard had been somewhere else while we took care of the monsters in the cages. If it had wanted to stop us from trespassing, then it would have transformed while we were occupied killing monsters rather than after.

“I wonder what Wawok hopes to accomplish with these experiments?” Dey placed a hand on her face and tilted her head to the side.

Someone appeared to answer that question for her.

“I have nothing to say to a general of the demon lord’s army. Worse yet, a demon-sympathizer.”

A sallow-looking man emerged from a corridor.

“Wawok Seiv...,” Rila murmured.

This was the elusive man we’d been searching for.

He looked rather sickly, but there was a peculiar elegance to him that only a vampire could possess.

“Oh my, oh my. If you were here, you should have just told us.”

“Anyone would hide and observe when beset upon by barbarians.” Wawok eyed the dead Spiny Lizard and sighed. “Things were going so well. Look what you’ve done to the poor thing.”

He didn’t seem too wary of us, as though he didn’t think we meant him harm.

I couldn’t help wonder what he was after, working in secret like this, but that

wasn't the current mission.

“My name is Roland Argan. Are you the individual who made this?” I produced Rila's collar from my breast pocket and showed it to Wawok.



“Ah, yes. Now that brings back some memories.” Wawok’s face brightened like I was offering him a dear old toy.

“It broke recently, and we’d like you to fix it, if possible.”

“I sold it when I left Hell long ago. It fetched a good price, too. I made it as an exercise.”

“It suppresses its wearer’s mana, right?”

“Yes, it does. I’m surprised you know.”

Wawok chatted with us gladly. First impression suggested he wasn’t a villain. He was more the type to pursue his interests and do whatever he wanted in pursuit of those interests.

He picked up the collar. “If the owner imbues it with mana, it can be used to transform the wearer into a cat or back to their original form. Yes, those were the days when I enjoyed such frivolous things. There was nothing special about it being a cat. It could’ve been anything, as far as I was concerned. I’ve since cut down on gimmicks. My current collars are purely for control. They can’t be removed by the wearers, but I’ve designed them to break when the wearer dies to keep my work from being stolen and abused.”

From the sound of things, we had a test model, while the monsters’ collars were the finished products.

“Can this be fixed?” I asked.

“Who was wearing this collar, just out of curiosity?”

“The demon lord.”

Wawok did a double take, all but asking me *What?!*

“By the ‘demon lord,’ do you mean *the* Rileyla Diakitep?”

“That’s right,” Roje answered. Her mouth twisted as she spoke. She was still unhappy about the collar.

“Then were you the one, by any chance, who defeated the demon lord?”

“I think it’d be more accurate to say I collared the demon lord.”

“Wow...,” Wawok said, clearly impressed. Then he clenched his left hand into a fist. “I’m amazed...especially considering the demon lord’s strength. And I suppose you lost your arm in that fight as well?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I see... Still, I’m sure it was a hard-fought battle...”

The battle against the demon lord was actually very easy. Apparently, Wawok was the type who wouldn’t listen once he made an assumption.

He regarded my missing right arm with a pained look. Based on how grateful he was that I defeated the demon lord, he definitely had to be part of the anti-pure-demon faction.

“Hell believes that the demon lord died. There was a rumor for a time she’d been resurrected, but thanks to you, she’s gone.”

“I sealed away her powers using this collar. So I’d like to be able to use this again.”

“If you have the collar...then where is the demon lord now?”

“Lord Rileyla’s hanging out nearby in a house, just outside of town,” Dey answered.

“The demon lord is *what...?*”

Wawok’s description of Rila painted a clear image of how Hell viewed her.

“I have spare collars like the ones on my little pets. They’re designed to break when the wearer dies as well. And they lack the gimmicky feature of turning the bearer into a cat.”

I shot a look at the shadow, silently asking what Rila thought.

“*Hmm...*”

“Well, that sure won’t work,” Dey said. “I mean, Lord Rileyla wants the collar so she can turn into a kitty cat, not because she wants to stay with Master Roland.”

“*Ah, y-yes, indeed... That is correct!*”

The demon lord’s voice was a little too high. Dey smirked at Rila’s response.

She was teasing her.

“H-however...i-if the spare collars are all you have, then so be it! I would not mind wearing one!”

Well, that was a reassuring response.

“Do I hear the voice of the demon lord...?”

Roje was the one to answer Wawok’s question. “This is Lord Rileyla’s Shadow magic. She is projecting her voice from a house some distance away.”

“I see... And if she remains in her original form, there will be trouble if Hell learns of her survival.”

Well, that technically already happened once. I looked to Roje.

“I cannot speak for the military, but she is still very popular on the streets, and her supporters are gaining some momentum.”

“I-is that so?”

“Why, of course, Lord Rileyla.” Roje never missed an opportunity to flatter her master.

Thankfully, Dey brought us back to our objective. “Anyway, the point is, can you fix it or not?”

Wawok checked on the collar again. “I think it will be faster to make a new one than to repair this one. However, the inclusion of the feline transformation will lengthen the process.”

Rila’s shadow sighed with relief. *“That is acceptable. How long will it take?”*

“Three months.”

That was a good chunk of time.

“More importantly...” Wawok tossed the collar aside and felt my right shoulder. He was checking on the remaining muscle. “I think you could become more powerful.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Don’t you want a right arm?”

I couldn't reply immediately. I didn't care about being strong anymore. At least, I wanted to not care...

"You sealed away the demon lord's powers while she was still alive. It'd be a waste to leave you without a right arm."

My mind worked to come up with reasons to refuse.

"In my current line of work, I only need one arm. I'm grateful for the offer, though."

"Is that right?"

"I'll keep an eye on Master Roland for eternity, so he doesn't need a right arm anymore. In fact...he doesn't need a left one, either..." Dey grinned, but that only made her remark more frightening. Having no arms would definitely hinder my work...

"We have preserved his limb to keep it from rotting. Do you mean to say you can reattach it?"

"I don't have any interest in anything so boring."

Apparently, something beyond Rila's capabilities was "boring" to Wawok. He was certainly an interesting man.

"I simply meant that I'd be able to prepare a superior replacement for you."

Wawok explained he was in this cavern to immerse himself in his research and experiments to develop new technology.

"Monster tamers are extremely happy with my work. The collars sell for a high price."

That made sense.

On top of being able to keep the monsters in check, the collars allowed them to transform in battle, as the Spiny Lizard had. When the larger size wasn't necessary, the monster could remain in its smaller form.

Wawok told us that the income from his developments went to excavating this cave. He struck me as generally good-natured and was willing to answer any questions I had.

“I saw the lizard suddenly turn into a dragon. What was that?” I inquired.

“That was the result of explosively accelerating the monster’s natural growth and drastically increasing its combat strength without sacrificing any natural features. It may sound forceful, but I’d prefer you think of it as the formula drawing out latent potential. It grants them bodies that can withstand their might.”

“And they change at their own will?”

“Yes. However, they’ll obey their owner’s commands because of the collar.”

Honestly, I’d been expecting more inhumane research.

Wawok told us that releasing the creatures was part of his preparation. The woods had few monsters and magical beasts, making it the perfect safe training grounds.

“I’d like to ask that you use a place farther from human settlements. Unfamiliar monsters can create a commotion. I ask this as a guild employee.”

Wawok shrugged. “All right, I understand. I never meant to cause trouble, you know. And losing monsters I put so much care into is a real nuisance.”

Once we settled on a date to return in three months, Rila’s shadow, Dey, Roje, and I left the underground lab. Wawok told us about a path that brought us to a staircase to ground level.

The steps led up into a building close to the capital.

“Well, that worked out well for you, Lord Rileyla,” Dey remarked.

“Indeed. Though I shall need to be patient.”

Patient, huh? The collar technically inhibited her. Most people would feel the opposite way about this.

“Our lives likely would have been very different if the vampire assisted us in the past.”

“It is just as you say.”

Roje and Rila entertained some idle chat while we walked.

The Spiny Lizard’s transformation was incredible. Creating a method to bring

that about was worthy of admiration.

“Don’t you want a right arm?”

Wawok’s words wouldn’t leave my head.

The next morning, I reported the facts to Iris.

“There’s a researcher who serves monster tamers. Some locals happened to spot some of his creatures while they were in the forest.”

I summarized the events in a written report. Iris read through it, nodding and humming in agreement.

“So they’re not dangerous?”

“They’re not. I’ve made sure. Special collars the researcher made keep the monsters in check.”

“And it seems that they become more powerful when needed in battle through this transformation formula, as you described it?”

“That’s right,” I replied.

“Isn’t this...kind of revolutionary?”

“It didn’t seem that he was after anything in particular by creating the collars. He’s been careful to ensure no one can abuse them. Baring a change of heart, I don’t think he’ll use his work for military purposes.”

“I see.”

Iris tapped the report against her desk to straighten the pages, then placed them in a drawer.

Had Wawok developed his creations during the war, he might have sold them to the military.

“Can I count on you to follow up with the clients?”

“Yes, I’ve already done so.”

“Oh, you have? Excellent work, as always.” Iris gave me a grin. “You know... today’s your day off.”

“Is that right?” I had come in to deliver my report without checking.

“But...you finally look like your normal self again.”

“My normal self, you say?”

Iris nodded. “You looked tense the whole time we were in Bardenhawk. What...really happened?”

Roje had explained away my lost arm as an accident, but Iris knew that was a lie.

“It wasn’t anything worth telling others about. It was just...a family dispute.”

“A family quarrel?” Iris cocked her head, confused, but I didn’t give her any more, instead turning to leave.

“Um, about today?!” she called to stop me.

I looked over my shoulder. “Yes?”

“This may be too late, but those of us from the Bardenhawk trip are planning to hold a dinner. Want to come??”

“Yes, I’d love to.”

Iris laughed. “You’ve really changed.”

“I never intended to... Have I really?”

She bobbed her head in the affirmative and told me to come back to the office before closing.

From the Lahti branch, I headed to Lina’s orphanage. I hadn’t seen her recently, and I wanted to check how things were going.

“Roland!” Lina spotted me right as I arrived and rushed over.

“It’s been a while,” I said.

She looked so young it was tough to believe she and Maylee were the same age. It was almost like her magical talent sucked away all the nourishment that should have gone to her growth.

“Roland, where’s your arm?”

“It’s gone,” I stated.

“Do arms disappear?”

“Sometimes.”

Lina regarded my missing limb with awe, but soon took my hand to lead me.

There were more children at the orphanage than I remembered.

“Ally said it’s been really awful.”

“That’s not surprising.”

“She thinks we need to hire some widows who’re looking for an outlet for their maternal instincts.”

What a specific job requirement.

“Stop that!” scolded an energetic voice I recognized instantly. It belonged to the orphanage’s director.

Kids ran through the garden, laughing.

“Almelia, you look well.”

“Oh, Roland. W-warn me before you stop by... You always drop in unannounced.” She averted her eyes while teasing a long golden lock between her fingers. “I’m doing fine...all thanks to you.”

“I’m happy to hear it.”

Almelia came to visit me after I’d woken up following the fight with Amy, but I’d spent the entire time speaking with King Randolph. I never had a proper talk with her.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll still beat you, even without an arm.”

“I see you’re just as confident as ever.”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“Grrr...”

Two boys snuck up behind Almelia and flipped up her skirt.

“Hyaaaah?!”

They both ran away screaming, and Almelia chased after them, shouting, “You’ve really done it now!”

I was glad to see they were enjoying themselves.

According to Lina, most of Almelia's work consisted of caring for the orphans.

"I suppose she needs more help now that there are more of them," I remarked.

This was a good time to make the orphanage a place of learning, as I'd suggested in the past. King Randolph was always prompt to send the establishment money, so the orphanage had the necessary equipment and food.

"Um, Roland, I..." Lina fidgeted, pulling her knees together.

"What is it? Do you need to use the bathroom?"

"N-no! I wanna...teach...magic..."

My eyes widened; I hadn't expected that. "Oh. How interesting."

"I tried to teach everyone a *teensy* little bit. It didn't go well, though... But if they can learn how to use it, I know they'll have fun."

"Getting others to understand a subject the same way you do is difficult, but I think it'll be a good experience." I tousled Lina's hair. "Maybe one of them will turn out to become a great mage like you."

"Even if they do, I'll still beat them."

"That's the spirit."

I wondered if Amy felt the same. There were some things you only learned by teaching. I believed Almelia was far from beating me, and I could hardly conceive of her doing so.



I also knew that deep down she felt responsible for my injury. But that was my fight, not hers. I had wanted to stop Amy for my own reasons and lost my arm because I didn't care what was necessary to win. I didn't regret it, either.

Perhaps Almelia wouldn't feel so bad if she knew my connection to Amy. On the surface, it looked like I'd sacrificed my arm specifically to protect her. Then again, Almelia would likely feel responsible no matter what.

"My right arm, huh...?"

Maybe it was better to replace it.

A crying child ran up to Almelia. There must have been a fight.

Almelia wasn't a hero or a princess here. She was simply an older girl for the kids to rely on. It suited her, in a way.

I said my good-byes to Almelia and Lina, then left.

"Knave, today was your day off, wasn't it?"

That was the first thing Rila asked me when I got home. Her lips were pursed. Milia, standing opposite her in the dining room, giggled softly.

"Apparently it was. I only realized after Iris told me, though."

"Now, that won't do, Mr. Roland! You really should check the time sheet regularly."

Evidently, Milia also had the day off, and she'd come by for a visit. She must have clued Rila in.

"I intended for you to accompany me to the capital on your next break so we could shop together!"

"Enough of that, Miss Prima Donna. Don't you have something to say to Mr. Roland?"

"Hmph. Yes. I nearly forgot... Welcome home."

That left me at a bit of a loss. I thought it was going to be something more momentous.

"Thanks. It's good to be back," I said.

“We’re going out for drinks with everyone who went to Bardenhawk, so you can’t eat yet. We should head to the guild in a bit.”

Rila raised an eyebrow. “What is this, now? Will there be drink?”

“Uh-huh! And our manager said she would treat everyone.” Milia, chin in her palms, happily kicked her feet back and forth.

“I shall accompany you,” Rila insisted.

“Nuh-uh. You’re not part of our group, Miss Prima Donna.”

“Are you implying I should eat all on my own tonight?!”

“Yes. You’ve been keeping Mr. Roland holed up here for too long.”

“Th-that has not been my intention in the slightest!”

“If you restrain him from doing things and demand that he take you places, he’ll get tired of you.”

“Urgh.” Rila scowled in chagrin.

An average village girl was holding her own against the strongest demon lord.

“We should get going soon,” Milia said, all but tugging me out the house. “We’re celebrating our work, so let’s drink and have a great time!”

“H-how unreasonable that I am forbidden from attending!”

It was a bit absurd that Rila should say that. Her very existence here was unreasonable.

“It’s perfectly fine,” Milia argued.

“I’ll try to come back as early as I can,” I said. “Just wait for me.”

“Mm-hmm... Acceptable,” Rila replied.

She didn’t seem pleased, but saw us off anyway.

I was certain she’d wait until I got home to eat. I’d have to buy something and get home as soon as possible.

5

The One-Armed Lecturer, Part I

“C’mon, Roland! Please!”

Tallow clasped his hands together as though in prayer as he entreated me from the other side of the counter.

“No, thank you. Ask as many times as you like. You’ll still get the same answer.”

“Don’t give me that,” he said. “Please?” I could see his face peek around his hands as he begged. I didn’t find the large man’s imploring very swaying. If anything, it had the opposite effect.

“Did you come all the way out to Lahti from the capital just because I didn’t answer you?” The letters were probably incinerated. I’d tossed them straight into the trash after reading them. “I never asked you to come here. Now, if that’s all, please move aside. That’s where the adventurers sit.”

“Don’t say that. Come on.”

Other employees were listening in and guessing at what we were discussing.

“I’d much prefer to sit in on a lecture. I’m your average guild employee and haven’t had much of a career here. I still have a lot to learn.”

The guild master was proposing the opposite.

“I know you’ll be a great instructor.”

“No thanks.”

“Just hear me out. At least consider the offer!”

“Stop getting your spit on everything. And quit being so loud. Some things never change.”

I tilted myself away from Tallow.

He wanted me to give a lecture on how I administered adventurer tests to all the branch offices. My achievements in that field were highly regarded. I could tell this offer only meant trouble, though.

“Word on the street is you’ve garnered a certain quality, since losing that arm of yours.”

“My reputation and whether I would make a good instructor are entirely different matters.”

“Ugh... You have a point, but still...”

As Tallow went silent as he undoubtedly thought up some other method to convince me. A low, familiar voice spoke up from the seat next to us.

“Hunh? Yeah, me? Yeah, I worked as a proctor for years. I got results, too. Plus, I’m very experienced.”

Maurey glanced at Tallow and me, talking loudly so we’d be sure to be overheard.

Perfect.

“I believe my senior colleague would do a spectacular job,” I lied. Maurey faced Tallow with a glint in his eyes.

“Ahh... There’s no one who can match your qualifications, Roland.” Tallow ignored my suggestion outright.

Come on, Maurey, you’ve got to have something more to win him over.

He coughed quite conspicuously and started talking to himself again. “I couldn’t *possibly* teach about *that thing*, but I suppose it’d benefit everyone if I did. Maybe I’ll try my hand at lecturing? I really shouldn’t teach *that trick*, though.”

Whatever he was getting at couldn’t be that special, but he hoped to draw Tallow’s attention by hinting at a special method he used.

An angry vein stood out on Tallow’s head, and he slammed his hand on the counter, sending a loud noise through the office.

“Keep quiet. I’m talking about something very important with Roland right

now.”

Maurey’s efforts had failed.

“...Sorry.” He shrunk away as though to match his tiny apology.

I thought it would have been the ideal job for Maurey, who loved showboating and forcing his way into things.

“Well, Roland, since you’re so set on refusing me, I have no choice but to call upon my last resort!”

“Oh? Now, that has me intrigued. Give me your best shot.”

“Get ready. You’ll be in tears.”

Tallow stood up in a rage and stomped past the counter into the branch manager’s office.

“Wait, he’s not...”

Two or three minutes later, Iris came out with Tallow trailing behind.

“Roland, I hear you haven’t been answering his letters. They were from the Adventurer Association, and I handed them directly to you, didn’t I?”

Tallow giddily cackled to himself.

That bastard... He went crying to Iris.

The branch manager had her arms folded, and she looked rather peeved.

“Yes, they all concerned a personal request that I judged unworthy of response,” I answered.

“Are you trying to claim a request for you to teach about the adventurer exam at the capital is a personal matter?”

Honestly, I refused because I didn’t want to stand out. Especially before a live audience. It was difficult to explain that, though.

“You never want to do what His Majesty asks but always help in the end. However, you seem disgusted by the thought of the guild master asking you a favor.”

Tallow frowned. “Seriously? You listen to His Majesty but not me?”

“That just so happened to be how things shook out in the past,” I said. “Also, a guild master is hardly comparable to a king.”

“There’s that heart of gold. You complain all through it, but still get the job done. So why can’t you say yes this time?”

“Because I’m close with King Randolph.”

“What about me?! Aren’t we buddies?!”

“If it’s that important, then order me to do it.”

“Grrr... That would still feel like my loss... It’s tacit admission that I can’t convince you of anything and never will...”

Iris looked between Tallow and me, seeming rather fed up. “I think it would be best for you to quit and find someone else suited to the role.”

“You realize I’m the top of the organization, right?!” Tallow cried.

“I’m not *your* employee. I’m Iris’s. Don’t try to pull rank when you don’t even see me on a regular basis.”

“What did you say, you little—?”

“Get ahold of yourselves!” Iris snapped. “Roland, as far as I understand it, you seem to be the best person for the position. This is part of your job, so please go.”

I glared at Tallow. He wore a triumphant expression.

“That’s right, Roland. Now stop being unreasonable.”

“You’re the one who tried to force something on me simply because it’s convenient for you.”

“That’s because you blatantly play favorites with the king even though we’re friends, too.”

“I do not.”

“You do.”

“Guild Master!”

Tallow flinched. “Yes?”

“In the future, if you have requests for Roland, please send them through me. I’m his boss, after all. That’s what you did when asking for his temporary transfer to the capital. What makes this time different?”

Tallow’s eyes met mine. It felt like a signal. “Aw, I’m sorry. We’re just close, this guy and me.” He grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me in.

“Hey, let go of me.”

“Even though he acts aloof, like a cat...,” Iris remarked.

“Gah-ha-ha! He’s always been like this. I thought he’d agree when I asked him directly, but the guy blew me off.”

Of course I did. I wasn’t the only one who could fill the lecturer position, but if he wanted someone who could do *both* jobs, then I was the best option.

“Guild Master, please be sure to go through me next time.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I know, I know.”

“Okay, Roland, I hope I can count on you for the lectures.”

“...All right,” I answered.

Tallow thumped me on the back without reservation.

“We start next week. I’m counting on you, Roland.”

“I understand.”

I headed out with Tallow to see him off, and he made a point of leaving through the back.

Once we were away from the others, Tallow whispered to me, “It’s the corrupt part of the Adventurer Association, the dark side of things, so to speak. I don’t really, um...”

“I know. I realized that you don’t want to involve Iris. It’s a good thing you contacted me directly.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“If that’s true, then find someone else to do your dirty work.”

“There’s no one else I can trust more than you.”

I gave him a strained smile and shrugged.

“And I’m sorry about your arm,” Tallow added.

“Why mention that now, of all times?”

Apparently, he felt some guilt over it like Almelia did. Tallow was the one who’d assigned me the broadscale quest.

When he volunteered nothing else, I told him what I was thinking. “For a price to defeat Amy, I think it was pretty low. Without your intel, I might not have stopped her from assassinating Almelia.”

“All right. I won’t mention it again. I won’t apologize or thank you. But if there’s any way to get your arm back, then—”

“That won’t be necessary. I only need one for my current work.”

Tallow was a loud and indelicate man, but he was driven by emotion.

“And the woman you live with...”

“...”

“Should everything go well, I’ll prepare a holiday house for her.”

“She’s a moody sort. I can’t promise she’ll be grateful.”

“That’s fine. I’d be glad if you liked it, too.” Tallow mounted a horse hitched near the front of the guild and bid me farewell.

When I arrived at the capital, I checked in at the Adventurer Association headquarters and went to the designated inn to drop off my luggage. I still had some time before the training course began, and I chose to spend it relaxing.

“I do wish I could have come in person,” said Rila’s shadow.

“Considering we don’t know how the people of the capital will perceive your demon lord mana, it’s safer this way.”

“You are correct...”

“I hope the collar is finished soon,” I said.

Rila always looked forward to eating and drinking in the capital, and she was definitely disappointed she couldn’t tag along this time.

“Dey checked on Wawok’s progress, but completion is a while off.”

Special, one-of-a-kind objects weren’t made in a day, after all.

“We could have walked out of the cavern with one if you’d settled for a collar that just suppressed your mana.”

“I—I prefer that collar and its design.”

I didn’t know if there was more to it than that, but I assumed Rila was picky about what she wore.

I pulled out the materials I prepared for my lecture.

“You are such a fastidious man.”

“Once I’ve agreed to something, I do it to the best of my ability. That’s all.”

“Well, despite what you say, it seems that many have come to rely on you because of that attitude.”

Rila snickered.

I left the inn and made for the headquarters so I wouldn’t be late. Once, I’d come here to attend a proctor seminar. Now I’d be giving one. The room was still empty, because I’d arrived too early.

“...”

“Is something the matter?”

“No.”

The shadow at my feet looked up at me.

“That cannot be true. Something vexes you... It’s almost as though you feel unsettled.”

“You think so?”

“Could it be...? Are you nervous?”

“Of course not.”

I checked on the materials I brought again.

“Your documents are upside down.”

“...”

She was right, yet I didn't realize it until she said so.

“For some reason, my back feels fidgety.”

“It's nerves.”

“And there's something churning in my stomach.”

“It's nerves.”

“I'd feel more at home killing someone than giving a lecture.”

“Ha-ha-ha. A serial killer now, are you?”

“Odd. I never felt this way during the battle with Amy or with you...”

“You are engaging in an activity you have never done before, and it seems you feel pressure while remaining consciously unaware of it.” Rila laughed again. *“I did not know you had such a weakness.”*

“It's not a weakness.”

“There's no need to fret. I do believe you stood before people in this very lecture hall and explained something in the past...”

“All I did then was offer another point of view about a magic circle. I wasn't there to provide a lesson to the entire class.”

“You feel so at home in battle, yet normalcy is still far from your grasp.”

“Don't act like you know what *normal* is.”

I heard the sound of the door opening, and a woman entered.

“Oh, you're...”

As soon as our eyes met, she rushed to me as she would a friend. The woman glanced at my empty sleeve, and I quickly explained it was the result of a work accident. Telling everyone I met was getting to be a chore.

“Weren't you here during the last round of proctor seminars?” she asked.

“Yes, I was,” I said.

“Me too. Back then, you said you were new, but now you're a lecturer!”

I heard an unhappy snort at my feet.

“You’re making it sound grander than it is.”

“Don’t be so modest! All the lecturers this time are famous mages and successful workers from headquarters.”

Was she implying I was counted among their ranks?

“The way you explained the spell last time was so easy to understand... I used it for reference often.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I smiled, and the woman returned it with a sheepish grin of her own before bobbing her head and taking a front-row seat.

“A business smile.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing at all.” Rila’s shadow plopped down before the lecturer’s desk. *“So this is your method of ensnaring maidens. What a terrible man you are.”*

“I’m not trying to ensnare anyone,” I replied.

“Regardless of your intent...I shall not leave your side today.”

“Do as you like.”

People gradually began to filter in and fill the seats.

“Oh, if it isn’t Roland!” a man called out as he walked in. He must have already heard about my arm, as he didn’t ask about it.

“Hello. It’s been a while.”

I remembered this man. We got to know each other when I was sent to work at a capital branch of the Adventurers Guild.

He smiled cheerfully, and we shared a handshake.

“I thought you had the look of someone who’d make his way up in the world. My eyes are never wrong.”

“I just so happened to be called to take the position and couldn’t refuse.”

“‘Just so happened’? These things don’t ‘just’ happen normally.”

They don’t happen normally?!

When the man realized how stunned I was, he added, “Uh, I mean it in a good way—really.”

So...should I be glad for this?

I had no idea whether to be happy.

“I’m looking forward to getting a lecture from someone so capable.” The man hurried off to find an open chair.

Soon, it was time to begin, and I started with a simple greeting. The nervousness from earlier was gone.

Tallow had requested that I talk about my normal standards for adventurer approval. Most of the attendees took diligent notes as they listened to me.

“The passing benchmark for a mana measurement is normally one thousand, but that’s merely a standard reference point, not an absolute qualifier. Even if someone is unable to reach that level, I will still allow them to pass if they have some method to compensate for the value.”

A stir ran through the room.

“What? But I thought passing the benchmark target for mana was a necessity for someone to be an effective adventurer.”

“I heard it’s the bare minimum for effective skill use...”

“That’s what others told me, too...”

There were plenty of whispers, but I continued without paying them any mind.

“Now, who was it who thought of the benchmark all of you were taught?” I asked, which put everyone in an awkward position, and they all got quiet. “In the end, it’s simply a chosen value. Skills use a slight amount of mana when invoked, but the amount varies between people.”

I used Ravi as an example, as she had had a value of two hundred and thirty.

“Her measured value is far below the benchmark, yet her skill makes up for it

by providing excellent defense. As guild employees yourselves, I don't need to explain how useful her talents are."

The crowd nodded in the affirmative. Most of them understood just fine.

"She is a great example of how an adventurer can't simply be evaluated based on mana value. So, in addition to that, I also use their character, potential, and unique characteristics to evaluate whether they have passed or failed using a comprehensive approach."

I used each of the adventurers I'd passed as examples and discussed where they later ended up.

"All this talk 'bout the itty-bitty things you consider is great and all," interjected one of the workers in the back, his voice resounding through the hushed room, "but I don't care much about their potential and put more value into whether they can beat me. That's my standard. And if they don't like that, I tell 'em they can just go somewhere else."

"Well, there's certainly something to that," I replied. "Proctors do have a say on whether someone has passed or not, despite their numerical results. That is definitely part of the exam in its own way."

The man nodded with satisfaction. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't done yet.

"However, if you do that, you risk the possibility of overlooking talent. And it may be presumptuous to say, but mistakes like that are why I'm here lecturing you."

"If an adventurer can't fight, they'll get killed out there!"

"No one's strong at first. Those with the desire to improve will do so through hard work."

"Those are some nice words, but they won't do you much good as a proctor. The only reason you go 'round spouting that logic is 'cause you're a weakling who lost an arm."

"Yes, I only have one arm, so I'm not particularly strong," I said, attempting to defuse the situation. Unfortunately, a terrific surge of mana erupted from my feet.

“That man... I shall not let him off easy...!”

“Calm down, you fool.” I gave the shadow a good prod with my toe.

“Wh-what was that just now...?!”

“It came from the lecturer...”

Everyone was staring right at me, looking pale—they’d sensed Rila’s mana.

“I am weak, but—”

“Then why’re you acting all snooty, huh?”

I invoked my skill and instantly made my way from the front of the room all the way to the back and gripped the man’s neck from behind.

“Huh?”

“I can, at the very least, crush your windpipe so you won’t talk again,” I whispered into the man’s ear. The other workers moved away in surprise.

“Huh? H-he disappeared? Whe—?”

“If you have something to add, please raise your hand.”

I could feel him trembling and breaking into a cold sweat.

“I-I-I’m sorry... I-I’ve apologized, s-so p-please let me go...”

I released the man like he asked. He faced me slowly, fear plain in his expression.

“I said to please raise your hand for any comments, didn’t I? Do you think you can do that from now on?”

“Y-yessir...!”

“I’m glad we’ve got that settled. I apologize for the interruption. Let’s continue.”

Once the lecture was over, Rila requested that we go to a tavern, so I found one near the headquarters.

Evening quickly turned to night.

The tavern seemed to be doing well, and I saw a few people from the

headquarters enjoying themselves after work.

“The pressure from your mana can sometimes manifest through your shadow based on your emotions. Be careful.”

The shadow sat on my lap holding a glass in both hands. It tilted the cup to sip some liquor.

“Hmph. Do you not feel any emotion when someone slights you?”

Rila herself couldn't taste anything, since the shadow was the one drinking. I guess she was just in the mood for the experience.

I drank from my cup, holding it with one hand.

“Those who make comments on my missing arm and believe I'm weak because of it are bound by stereotypes. I could be using a skill or magic to hide my arm to catch opponents off guard. Anyone who thinks less of someone missing a limb will realize their mistake when they're on the ground dying.”

If I were in a battle with a one-armed foe, I'd be wary of why my opponent was missing a limb. There was a possibility they simply had just the one arm, but it could also be invisible. That would make the fight challenging, to say the least.

“That may be so, but we are not speaking of combat situations!”

Rila had been fuming since the outburst during the lesson.

“It's a matter of your honor... I shall allow no one to besmirch you.”

“I don't have enough honor for anyone to besmirch,” I replied.

“Why do you think so low of yourself?”

Rila's shadow grabbed some bar snacks and munched on them.

“So regarding Wawok's proposal...what do you intend to do?”

“You mean about my right arm? I don't mind not having one. In fact, I've gotten used to it.”

“While I commend your adaptability...I prefer your two arms squeezing around...”

“Squeezing around what?”

The shadow fidgeted on top of my lap.

“Excuse me. You’re Mr. Argan, the lecturer from earlier, right? May I?” A young female guild employee indicated the seat next to mine. I nodded.

“*Hmm?*” the shadow intoned.

The chair was empty, so the woman could have sat down without bothering to ask me.

“Oh, good. Are you alone?”

“Yes. Did you attend the lecture?”

“I did. I wanted to ask about some things you discussed.”

Apparently, she was quite passionate about her work and approached to ask more specific questions about my adventurer examinations. I thought it was wonderful she took her work so seriously. Honestly, I could take a page from her book when it came to my professional attitude.

We spoke for a while, then left the tavern as the night wore on.

“Um, so...if you have the time, would you like to accompany me somewhere else? I know a very quiet venue.”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid that I have to bow out now for today. Thank you for the invitation.”

I gave her a quick bow and left.

“Grrr. Is it your face?! The glasses? Or perhaps the one arm gives you a counterintuitive enigmatic allure?! Those women!”

I looked back to see the guild employee waving good-bye.

“It’s not about allure—I simply stand out, so I leave an impression.”

“I am not so convinced,” Rila said.

Evidently, I wasn’t cut out to be an assassin anymore. Leaving a strong impression meant I couldn’t do my job.

“What were you going to say before? Something about squeezing

something?”

“I—I do not recall...”

“Then let me know once you do.”

I placed the shadow on my shoulder and walked down the street.

“Amy still has yet to awaken. How do you feel?”

“I’m not sure. Without her skill, she’s less of a threat, but her technical assassination methods don’t depend on her skill or magic. I’d be uneasy if we let her loose.”

“Then shall we kill her while she sleeps?”

“...”

“I jest. I will not allow you to kill her. I simply wished to hear you turn down the suggestion.”

I felt relief somewhere inside me.

My plan to weaken Amy was supposed to involve me dying. Maybe that’s why I didn’t know what to do with her now. I never expected to still be alive.

“Once she’s awake, I’d like to talk with her.”

“Naturally, I plan to inform you as soon as she stirs. You needn’t worry.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I must also thank her.”

“Thank her? Why’s that?”

“If not for her, I wouldn’t have met you.”

I glanced at the shadow, but it had fled to my blind spot.

“When did you become so sappy?”

“I—I am simply tipsy.”

The shadow did the drinking, not Rila herself.

I kept that to myself, though, shrugging instead.

“What do you intend to do now?”

“Return to the inn and prepare for the lecture the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s not what I mean. That tiger man with the round face requested a favor, did he not?”

Tiger? Rila had to be describing Tallow. At least she got the first letter in his name correct.

“Oh, that.”

To put it simply, there were apparently some in the Adventurer Association who didn’t approve of Tallow, an adventurer, rising to the position of guild master.

“A dreary coup d’état? How droll.”

“These things can happen in any organization.”

Even the Welger Company disposed of its original head via a nefarious plot.

Unfortunately, this issue was a bit more complicated.

I checked to make sure I sensed no one around, then explained. “King Randolph appointed Tallow as guild master. Tallow was an S-rank adventurer back then, and he fought in the war. The nobles agreed with the decision at the time because of Tallow’s achievements, but the war’s over. Feelings have shifted, and there’s a growing movement in the aristocracy to replace the guild master.”

“Indeed, the ability to do well at a job and to continue to hold power are entirely separate.”

Hearing that from the demon lord herself was impactful.

“What do you think is going on at the Adventurer Association, then?” I asked.

“I suppose it’s a war, of a sort—the master installed by the king versus the nobles who dislike him. Should the tiger man be ousted, the king would lose face, and the Adventurer Association will fall under the nobles’ thumbs.”

“Exactly,” I replied.

Adventurer rewards had increased during Tallow’s tenure as guild master. This raise was always meant to happen. According to Tallow’s letters, he hadn’t taken specific action to increase pay.

So where was this money going before he took over? The answer was so obvious it hardly required consideration.

King Randolph had likely appointed his one and only S-rank adventurer at the time as guild master specifically because he suspected the truth.

“The Adventurer Guild system is well made. Should it decline, the capable talent will likely depart for other countries.”

“And if that happens, guild employees will be laid off. And I went through all that trouble to get this job. I’d hate to lose it over nobles attempting to make easy money.”

“Such aristocrats will first seek to purge talents that might cause backlash.”

“In which case, they won’t go after someone at the bottom like me, but Iris or Milia...”

“Why do you have such a low opinion of yourself...? I was speaking of you. Well, enough.”

The business district of the capital was alive beneath the moon. I heard excited voices as I passed by shop fronts.

“So do you intend to do something?”

“You said it yourself: The ability to do well at a job and to hold power call for entirely separate talents.”

“Hmm?” The shadow tilted its head, as though Rila didn’t understand what I was getting at.

“I know someone perfect for this job, who knows how to finesse a situation.”

“Oh? You have a friend like that?”

“I’ve heard she has more time on her hands than she knows what to do with. I’m not sure she’ll agree to help, but...with her around I won’t need to worry.”

“You have that much faith in her? Someone who can finesse a situation... You don’t mean...?” The shadow began to tug at me. *“I—I shall not allow it!”*

“?”

“Wh-while it may seem that I have ample free time...I—I am burdened with

the important task of waiting for you to return home.”

“I didn’t mean you. I meant Serafin.”

“...”

I laughed quietly as the shadow kicked my neck.

“Y-you attempted to deceive me!”

“Don’t blame me for your misunderstanding.”

“You wanted to embarrass me!”

“That’s a heavy accusation.”

I’d have to visit the castle tomorrow.

The next morning, I headed off to the castle where Serafin was staying.

I intended to give King Randolph a quick greeting while I was at it, but it seemed he was out, because I didn’t find him in his personal chambers. Almelia was at the orphanage.

“Has she made the castle’s wine cellar her personal quarters?”

“It’s not a wine cellar so much as a general storage room for alcohol. Her reward for defeating the demon lord is unlimited access.”

“Mm-hmm... But there is a limit to how much one should drink...”

I wholeheartedly agreed.

The party of heroes included Almelia, Lina, Elvie, Serafin, and me. Most probably assumed I was the oddball, but that title actually went to Serafin.

“What type of person is she?”

The servants in the castle knew me as the king’s friend, so they stopped and bowed upon spotting me.

“Serafin is...the one with the most quirks. Almelia is reckless, Lina is simple and oblivious, and Elvie is foolishly honest. Serafin is...insolent but doesn’t show it.”

“That hardly sounds like praise for any of them... But I understand she is rude.”

“She’s also smart.”

Rila would understand once she met Serafin. I continued through the castle to the basement storeroom.

Serafin Mariad’s room ≡ was written on the door.

“Knave, I believe I understand what you mean. She is a most dangerous one...!”

After getting a whiff of just what we were in for, Rila went on alert.

Apparently, Serafin had been holed up in here since the war ended, so King Randolf started work on another storeroom in secret.

I entered without knocking and found a woman with her head in a barrel. Her legs peeked out from under her habit.

“Hey, Serafin. Are you alive?”

The woman sluggishly pulled herself from the barrel. This was Serafin, albeit looking rather unwell, if the color of her face was any indication.

“Ohh, Mr. Roland... So you’ve finally come to see meee?”

“It’s been a while. I have a favor to ask.”

“My, what happened to your dear arm?”

“It’s gone,” I said. “Better ventilation this way, don’t you think?”

“Hee-hee. What a good joke...*hic*...”

“Knave, I smell danger! You would do well to take some distance as a precaution...”

The shadow was tugging on my clothes.

“You wouldn’t answer any of my letters. I wondered what happened...”

“Nothing happened. I contacted you with a question, and you answered. That’s all the exchange ever needed to be.”

“I was so hoping to get a letter saying you’d wed me, the bygone spinster, instead of Almelia.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

Serafin had been drinking and making a mess nonstop. Empty bottles rolled around on the ground. There were more opened wine barrels than could be counted on two hands.

“The alcohol in the castle is so much better than I imagined... I simply cannot pry myself away from this place...”

“That seems to be a matter of your willpower.”

Serafin began to cry and threaten to vomit.

I remembered something Almelia had said...

“Sera’s basically turned into a monster of the storeroom, so I think you should wait until she leaves of her own accord.”

I almost *wanted* to wait until she was ready to come out, but I couldn’t.

“Serafin, I need your help.”

“Oh, Mr. Roland...have you finally realized what a good mother I will be...?”

“No, it’s for a job.”

“What?! A jobbbbbb...”

She picked up an empty glass, scooped some liquor from a barrel, and drank. Her eyes were unfocused, and she swayed back and forth.

“Yes, I see why she has gone unwed...,” Rila muttered.

“Huh? That voice... It was the demon lord’s... And it came from the doll made from magic...”

She was sharp.

Rila’s shadow hid behind my back to escape the drunkard’s eyes.

“That’s irrelevant right now.”

“I knew you were alive when they couldn’t find a body. And Miss Almelia told me you were alive and well when she visited. I was suspicious when you asked about the collar in your letter, but after hearing that voice, I’ve got it all figured out.”

“And what do you intend to do about it?”

“With you around, the world will be at peace, so I see no issue with it.”
Serafin grinned.

“Listen, Serafin. You’re a great negotiator. Our party would’ve had it much worse without you. You’re the one who got us to work together with other units during the war.”

“Hee-hee.”

I could have taken on that role, but I had trouble negotiating with others and keeping things friendly.

Corps commanders weren’t likely to listen to what some random man told them. Had I tried meeting with them, they likely would’ve ignored me.

“So you’ll marry me, then?”

“No.”

“Is it because I’m a decade older than Miss Almelia and Miss Elvie?! And I’m about three times older than Lina...”

“That’s not the reason,” I said, but Serafin started sobbing and collapsed to the ground.

“It seems her singular personality trait is that she is idiosyncratic. She is unhinged and tedious to deal with...!”

Even Rila seemed put off by her.

Now that Serafin was crying, no matter how many times I tried speaking with her, we kept going in circles.



I'd ask her for help, she'd become convinced I meant in a nuptial way, and when I tried to tell her no, she'd bawl and bemoan her age. And on top of that, she stole glances at me with every sob. This woman was nothing if not calculating.

"So be it. I'll have to use *it*, then."

I had the shadow help me roll a hogshead cask of water over from another storeroom.

"*What do you intend to do with this?*" asked Rila.

"Just watch," I said. "Real Nightmare."

"*Oh-ho. Now that is some magic I taught you long ago. Wonderful.*"

I cast a spell on Serafin. She wasn't any help to me while drunk.

"Look, Serafin, this is a legendary high-grade alcohol that won't make you feel sick no matter how much you drink."

"Really? Thank you so much, Mr. Roland... I knew in my heart that you weren't the type to abandon a maiden, even if she's a drunkard past her prime."

Serafin gave me a humbled look with her hands clasped over her chest.

"Your age and appearance don't matter. It's what's inside that's important," I replied.

"That's right! You truly understand, Mr. Roland!"

Yeah. It was what was on the inside that counted. And I needed a way to deal with all the booze inside her.

"A legendary liquor... It smells wonderful..."

Serafin inhaled deeply through her nose. After she removed the cask lid, she punched it in half with a grunt.

"*S-such vigor...*"

"Serafin, that's all for you, so I'll wait upstairs. Let me know once you've finished all of it."

“Understood!”

Serafin was so taken with the water that she’d forgotten there were two others in the room with her.

Rila’s shadow and I left and waited in a spare room in the castle.

“If she drinks it all, it should be enough to get the alcohol out of her system and make her easier to deal with.”

“Knave, when she realized I am the demon lord...do you think she tricked us into confirming it?”

“...”

“I appeared before humans during the war, but I do not believe any of them ever heard my voice,” she explained.

I clicked my tongue unconsciously.

“I can’t believe her...”

“I believe I understand why you think her so capable.”

Perhaps Serafin had expected this for a while. When she gave me the collar, she said it would be perfect for the demon lord. I was surprised she still remembered that.

She must have pieced things together when I recently asked about the collar. Even Tallow had heard rumors of the demon lord’s revival, after all.

“You are rarely outdone. It was a sight to be seen.” Rila chuckled, delighted.

6

The One-Armed Lecturer, Part II

Two days later, the Serafin I remembered finally made an appearance.

By then, my work as a lecturer was complete.

“Mr. Roland, I’ve finally finished drinking.”

Serafin entered while I was having tea with Almelia in the castle.

“Sera... You don’t smell like booze!”

“Miss Almelia, that’s not something you should say to a lady.” Serafin laughed. She was back to her usual self at last.

“Roland, what in the world did you do? I thought Sera was set to become a monster forever lurking in the castle basement.”

“I used the same trick I used on you.”

“To me? Y-you mean a-a k-k-kiss?!”

“Huh?”

Serafin strode right up to the table Almelia and I were sitting at.

“Of course you go right to making it into a whole love affair. That’s just like you, Miss Almelia.”

Serafin looked a lot better. She’d consumed three times her body weight in water. There probably wasn’t a drop of alcohol left in her system.

After chatting for a bit, Serafin and I bid our good-byes to Almelia. Serafin had deduced my connection with the demon lord earlier, but I wasn’t sure if she still remembered that. She was pretty inebriated when it happened.

Rila’s shadow followed at a cautious distance, evidently worried. Rila probably assumed it would confirm Serafin’s suspicion.

Serafin was tenacious and sharp, after all.

It was best not to mention the subject. I didn't need unnecessary trouble.

"Where are we headed?"

"To Tallow."

"Mr. Tallow? You mean the adventurer?"

"He's the chairman of the Adventurers Guild now... The guild master."

"I had no idea." Serafin sounded wholly different sober.

When I asked how long she'd been in the cellar, she told me since the end of the war.

"I want you to help Tallow," I explained.

"Hahhh... Help him, you say?"

During the trip to the guild headquarters, I told Serafin about the relationship between the Adventurer Association's upper management and the guild master.

"I see... You know, Mr. Roland, there's something about this I don't get."

"What's that?"

"Aren't you just an ordinary guild worker...? Why do you have to do all this for Mr. Tallow?"

Yes, why indeed.

"Tallow's no good at the diplomatic stuff. He worked his way up as an adventurer. If he's unseated, the nobles will do as they please with the guild. The organization will likely become corrupt, and bribery, crime, and cronyism will run rampant. And if that happens... Well, I'm sure you've caught on."

"Client dissatisfaction will lead to fewer quests..."

"Yes. And as a consequence, only those employees who brownnose the higher-ups will remain. Any who don't fall in line will be bullied into quitting."

Serafin shook her head.

"You're rather good at knowing what the nobility wants, Mr. Roland."

“Knowing isn’t the same as liking it or even tolerating it.”

“I suppose you have a point,” Serafin replied.

“So you picked a past-her-prime virgin priest like me to help out, figuring I have nothing better to do?”

“That’s exactly right.”

“You didn’t even bother to stop me from putting myself down! Only you could be so fantastically horrible, Mr. Roland!”

I’d never been praised quite like that before.

Once we arrived at the guild headquarters, we went to Tallow’s office.

“Do you really believe I’ll be able to assist?”

“I’m sure you won’t have any problems.”

“Well, if you say so, Mr. Roland.” Serafin flashed me a grin.

When I knocked on the door, Tallow’s voice called, “Come in.”

Inside, the man himself was reading some documents with a troubled expression.

“What’s wrong? That frown doesn’t suit you.”

“I can’t help it. There’s an executive meeting at headquarters... Hmm?” Tallow had raised his gaze from the documents and finally spotted Serafin.

“Hello, Mr. Tallow.”

“Our Saint of Protection? What brings you here, my lady?”

Right, that’s what they called her during the war. The title brought back some memories.

Serafin and I sat at a low table surrounded by sofas.

“I’m just a lowly guild employee,” I said. “I doubt nobles will listen to me, so there’s no point to my dealing with them. I’m not cut out to be a negotiator. Serafin, on the other hand, will do well in the position.”

“Oh-ho... Sounds like someone I can rely on.”

Tallow stood and joined us at the table, sitting on the sofa opposite us.

“She’s pretty sharp and competent, and very good at thinking on her feet.”

“Oh, you’re embarrassing me.”

“Well, if you’re willing to talk her up that much, Roland...”

“Mr. Roland, does that mean you’ll marry me?”

The shadow, which had made its way outside of the window at some point, was staring holes in me.

“Serafin, you need to stop equating praise to a marriage proposal.”

Tallow glanced at Serafin, then looked away.

Serafin’s, Elvie’s, and Almelia’s looks didn’t sway me after spending so much time in a party with them. However, they were much prettier than average, and each was popular for it. Lina was too young to be counted.

I understood why Tallow was so flustered.

Milia and Iris were also lovely, and they were better suited to him.

“Why don’t you let her give it a shot at your meeting?” I suggested.

“All right, but the next one might be better. This one’s about to start.”

I looked at Serafin, and she smiled.

“If you’ll permit me, I’d like to read your documents to get a better understanding of the situation. I’d also like to know what outcome you’re aiming for based on the data. I should be able to attend the meeting with that information.”

“All right, then.”

Tallow spread the papers out on the table and talked through his thoughts on the situation. He quickly explained the demands he expected from the aristocrats hoping to oust him.

The nobles’ discussion was focused on the expenses accumulated during the Bardenhawk broadscale quest.

I had my own opinions on how to shoot down their demands, but nothing

would come of me voicing them. I'd probably throw the place into chaos, so it was better that I wasn't attending the meeting.

I was curious to see Serafin at work, though, and I created a shadow to observe the affair in my place.

Once it was time, a worker came to get Tallow.

The guild master retrieved his documents and left with Serafin. I had the shadow stealthily tail them and sneak into the meeting room, then I borrowed its eyes and ears.

Several nobles—guild directors—sat down with Tallow. Serafin took a vacant one and joined them.

The facilitator gave Serafin a questioning look, which prompted Tallow to speak up. "I believe you all are already familiar with her, but may I introduce you to Serafin Mariad. She will be helping me, starting today."

Serafin nodded upon being introduced.

The others didn't hide their disdain.

"It seems you're unable to speak to us without hiding behind the authority of a member of the party of heroes."

Despite the cutting remark, Tallow gave the noble a cheerful smile.

"That's right. As an upstart adventurer with no education to speak of, I'm afraid I'd drag the discussion down, but that won't be an issue anymore."

I didn't like conversations where you couldn't be frank about your opinion. These nobles had undoubtedly pushed Tallow into a corner. The odd-looking fake smile on his face was proof enough of that.

The meeting quickly headed to the main topic at hand.

"So you set up a guild in Bardenhawk... We have no issue with that, but how do you intend to recoup the costs?"

The Bardenhawk guild was the brainchild of Queen Leyte, but I guess we shouldered most of the costs that came with establishing the system. Bardenhawk had lacked the capital for the upfront price, but the nobles were

right to question Tallow on how to make back the money.

“I have brought these documents for your perusal. They should explain.”

Tallow handed the sheets to the others.

“Gathering capital needs to be viewed from the long term. During that time, Bardenhawk will finish its recovery efforts and our two nations will forge a strong bond.”

One of the nobles sighed dramatically and exchanged a look with his neighbor, both of them mocking Tallow.

“We are talking about collecting the money we lost, not cozying up to another country.”

Tallow hadn’t expected this particular rebuttal—he clearly stiffened. He let his emotions show on his face too easily. That was his weakness.

“It seems we’ve strayed from the topic at hand. Please take another look at these documents,” Serafin said. The nobles cocked their heads, but obeyed. “We built a guild in Bardenhawk because it is a necessary institution. Using and adapting to that system is much easier than having lords dispatch knights and guards. There’s a lack of manpower and supplies at the moment, so adventurers are truly invaluable.”

“What’s your point?”

“The reconstruction effort demands a lot of resources. And where will Bardenhawk come by those resources?”

Hmm. That was a good point. I probably would’ve mentioned it, too.

“...”

This time, it was the nobles’ turn to go quiet.

“Bardenhawk will import supplies from its neighbor, Felind.”

Merchants from Bardenhawk would purchase goods from Felind and spend their money here.

“Knowing this, it seems trivial to discuss the small price of the broadscale quest.”

Serafin opened up the scope of the meeting with a single question. She was adept at gauging the time for moves like that.

“And transportation protection and supply guarding are common quests at the guild. Aren’t they?”

“Y-yes, they are. That’s right,” Tallow answered.

“The constant stream of those sorts of jobs keeps the guild busy. If the number increases, then it stands to reason that we will see more profit in turn.” Serafin seemed on the verge of grinning triumphantly. She was growing convinced that the aristocrats were at her mercy. “Please remember the big picture when you offer your opinions instead of focusing on the minor details... Heh-heh.”

This proved to be the deciding blow, as the rest of the meeting continued without issue. Once it finished, I dismissed the shadow and waited for Serafin and Tallow to return to the office.

“That was pretty thrilling, Roland,” said Tallow.

“If only you were smarter, this whole thing would have gone smoothly without inconveniencing anyone,” I replied.

“What? Were you listening in?”

“Just for a spell—using a spell.”

Telling him to be better in all aspects of his job was probably going too far. Instead, I turned to Serafin. “Looks like I made the right decision asking for your help.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes. If I said any of that, the situation would’ve soured, yet you got the nobles to quit squabbling over small stuff. People like them usually take advantage wherever they can, depending on who they are talking to.”

“So you mean that in that situation, it wasn’t what was said but who said it that mattered?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“You taught me that, Mr. Roland. That resorting to a bluff is a viable method of getting someone to see your way.”

I had no recollection of ever telling Serafin as much.

“Also that most people lose the forest for the trees. If they won’t take small hints, then it’s best to increase the scope of the conversation. This confuses those you’re negotiating with. I remember your advice like it was yesterday.”

“Did I really say all that?”

“Yes. You claimed you weren’t any good at it, so you trained me in the basics of how to mediate and hold a meeting.”

“I guess I did...”

I really didn’t remember doing most of that, but now that Serafin mentioned it, it seemed about right.

“Miss Almelia carries the weight of the nation on her shoulders, Miss Elvie is from a notable family in another country, and Miss Lina is much too young. As a neutral priest, I’m best suited to this role.”

“So, basically, it was Roland’s training that got you here.”

Serafin laughed. “That’s exactly right, Mr. Tallow.”

I thought she’d do well as Tallow’s adviser. Plus, she had connections with the royal family, especially Almelia, which was a great boon for a facilitator.



“There’s no matching her as long as she throws her reputation as a former member of the party of heroes around.”

After the meeting, Lord Gholn had returned to his residence to drink with the other nobles who’d also attended.

His clap summoned a graceful teenage servant who brought more liquor and platters of food.

“If we could just oust Tallow, we could do as we please, but at this rate...” He

shook his head.

The original four directors had died long ago, and their positions passed down to the heads of their noble houses throughout the generations. After becoming his family's latest director, Lord Gholn realized that his house benefited greatly thanks to the Adventurers Guild.

That stopped when Tallow took over as guild master and realized there was money being held up that should go to adventurers instead.

"I have heard that Lady Serafin was the main social influence in the party of heroes. She must be quite experienced with these types of negotiations," Lord Gholn said, causing his peers to huff. None of them were pleased.

"I don't enjoy losing arguments..."

Two others nodded in agreement.

These nobles simply concerned themselves with saving face, and their thoughts only went as far as their coffers. In a way, their minds were incredibly easy to understand.

"His Majesty has kept his hands too clean."

They were already getting into their regular complaints. Their greed knew no bounds.

"He left governing the land to the aristocracy, so he ought to trust us more..."

"And we pay his taxes. He should leave us be," Lord Gholn added, and the others agreed immediately.

"Is Tallow proving difficult to handle?" one of the nobles asked.

Lord Gholn recognized immediately that they meant assassination, and he bobbed his head.

"Yes. It's been difficult. How shall I put this...? He has senses like a wild animal, and my men simply haven't been able to carry out the act..."

"Don't you have any better talent?"

"If we act too conspicuously, we'll become a target of His Majesty's political purge. I think we should move with due prudence."

The other aristocrats had come to rely on Lord Gholn after learning he maintained ties to the criminal underworld.

“The last thing we want is for someone to make a blunder and the rest of us to pay the price for it,” one man said.

“It’s exactly as you say.”

Tallow was a challenging opponent to deal with, but Lord Gholn thought it’d be easier if he were still active.

He’d washed his hands of such things, however. So all he could do was lament his subordinates’ gutlessness.

“What about that woman? She didn’t fight at the front lines like Lady Almelia did.”

Lord Gholn’s fresh proposal drew all eyes to him. They all gave their thoughts.

“She shouldn’t have much skill in combat.”

“Without her around, ousting Tallow will be a matter of time.”

“In combat, she hardly seems to stack up to the other members of her old party.”

Lord Gholn let out a small, nearly imperceptible sigh.

These people were only good at using others and protecting themselves.

Lord Gholn, on the other hand, sought to continue enjoying his easy life. He didn’t particularly want to line his own pockets.

“All right... Then I’ll begin things with an investigation.”

Lord Gholn called in one of his people and ordered them to investigate Serafin Mariad.

That seemed to put the other three aristocrats at ease, if the relaxed atmosphere in the room was anything to go on.

He understood why his three compatriots didn’t stand a chance against a maiden who’d stood on the front lines. After his cohorts finished taking their fill of drink and food, Lord Gholn retired to his room to imbibe alone.

“Serafin Mariad.”

He wondered what his reward would have been had he taken her out back in his day.

All the hair on Lord Gholn’s body stood on end. He sensed a presence. His back shuddered, and cold sweat dripped from his forehead down to his neck.

“You realized from that feeling alone? Now I’m *sure* you’re who I thought.”

The voice came from behind him, but Lord Gholn didn’t want to turn around. Plus, he knew that if he moved, this presence at his back would kill him.

“I haven’t abandoned my *memory*.”

Lord Gholn recalled this feeling well.

He remembered when the tables were turned on him, the disgraceful feeling of being a target for the first time in his life.

Was this the same person from long ago?

“I never imagined the very assassin King Rubens hired to kill me would be in a place like this.”

He was sure King Rubens had initiated the Friday Purge in the Holy Land of Rubens. Which meant the person behind him was...

“Wh-what are you here for? To kill me?”

“I wouldn’t do anything so boring. I stopped by for a little chat.”

There were footsteps. A man appeared from just out of sight and took a seat across from Lord Gholn.

The man wore a guild employee’s uniform.

Was he on some sort of mission?

“I suggest you cut it out.”

“...”

“I’ll say it again. Don’t do it. This is your only warning.”

The man had a much softer air about him than when he had been dread-inspiring and keen like a blade.

“If you’ve truly given up sully your hands, then do not stick your nose where it doesn’t belong. Otherwise, I’ll need to tell King Randolph the truth.”

Lord Gholn had been found out.

“I’m like you. I’ve abandoned the trade, and as you can see...”—the man pointed at himself—“I’m a normal guild employee.”

“Y-you sought a peaceful life like me?”

He’d given up despite possessing abilities other assassins could only dream of? It sounded like a joke.

“Am I not allowed to?”

“I...want to thank you for something. You’re the reason I quit that line of work.”

“Really?”

“Back in my heyday, I thought myself invincible... But when I saw you, I realized I’d never match up. Your skills were overwhelming to the point it was presumptuous of me to compare us. You broke me. Easily.”

“Did I now?” the man said quietly. “Do nothing, and you may remain as a noble. And you’ll save me the trouble of spilling blood needlessly. It benefits the both of us. Think it over. Which is most important to you? Money, your honor, or your life?”

Having said all he wished, the man disappeared.

Lord Gholn heard the ice in his glass *clink*. He nearly believed his terrifying visitor to be a hallucination, but he was certain he felt that presence.

Lord Gholn ordered the underling he’d dispatched to withdraw.

That was enough... He wouldn’t do it anymore. He would quit—all of it.

Lord Gholn stood and packed a bag with all the money he had. His son peeked in, looking worried.

“Father, what’s wrong?”

Lord Gholn met this boy as a young child. Now he was fourteen, and it was time to bid him good-bye.

“From this moment on, you are the head of the house of Gholn.”

“Father? What are you saying?”

“Your real father...Fury Gholn is dead.”

“What are you—?”

Lord Gholn pushed his son aside to leave.

“What’s gotten into you, Father?”

He didn’t answer.

None of this was ever truly his. The name, the status, the money, the mansion, even the child.

The man released his skill.

He felt refreshed, as though bathing for the first time in ages.

“Ahhhh. It’s been so long since I had my own face. How did he know it was me, disguised as I was?”

The impostor Lord Gholn took quite a bit of money with him, enough to live a quiet life in a random country town.

He still put on the affectations of a noble. Well, that would be fine for the time being.

“Seven years, huh... It was a pretty short ride.”

This man had pretended to be Count Fury Gholn, who would have been thirty-nine now.

He’d deceived laymen, but failed when it came to that assassin.

Changing his body, clothes, and face still failed to bury some unnaturalness that came with using his skill.

The one thing he could say for certain was that he’d never have to live as someone else again.

He’d never have to lie.

That man had changed his life twice.

Perhaps he ought to be grateful.

◆Roland◆

Upon returning to the guest room in the castle, I found Serafin waiting.

A bottle of amber liquor was on the table, and she'd prepared two glasses with ice. When she noticed me enter, she started to pour our drinks.

"Where were you?"

"Bathroom," I said.

Serafin laughed elegantly and offered me a glass.

"You left us behind with the same excuse..."

"What are you talking about?"

Evidently, Serafin had put together most of the puzzle, but I hinted to her that I didn't want her saying it aloud.

"You sure do take a long time," she remarked.

"Guess so."

Serafin was the only one I could share a drink with in the party of heroes.

I could have shared one with Elvie, but the Goody Two-shoes wouldn't try a single drop, claiming it'd affect her the next day.

"This feels like old times." Serafin prodded her ice with a pointer finger.

"I believe you were the one who won our group the military's approval to bathe every day."

"Ha-ha-ha. Yes, I suppose I did do that. Miss Almelia and Miss Elvie are both such naive girls. Do you remember when they asked for help about how to broach that subject?"

"Did that happen?"

Serafin nodded. "It did."

Time seemed to pass slowly.

I felt eyes on me and noticed Rila's shadow staring from the cracked door.

"May I invite her in?"

"Sure, I don't mind."

Serafin had also noticed the shadow.

I signaled for it to enter, and the shadow hesitatingly approached.

"What will you do with her, Mr. Roland?"

The shadow tiptoed over to me and climbed onto my lap.

"Nothing. We've found a way to repair the collar. I'll just have her wear it again."

"And she'll...listen to you?"

"If it's what she wants, then yes."

"Hmm?"

The shadow picked up my glass in both hands and sipped. It nearly looked like a tiny child.

"What an odd person."

"She and I have both set aside our pasts. She's left it all behind."

"So you claim, but you've built new relationships with people... That's why you came to the capital at Tallow's request, and why you're here drinking with me. I wonder, can she say the same?"

My time as an assassin was over, but there were still people I relied on, and Rila was the same...

"Once the collar is fixed, we won't need to worry about that anymore."

"I suppose you're right. If something were to happen, would you be able to handle it with one arm?"

"Of course. I never really fought with a style that required two hands anyhow. A hand-to-hand fight might be a different story, but my style is to find an unguarded moment and kill in a single blow. I can manage with one arm."

"You sound just like you used to."

“Don’t worry about me. Even if I’ve changed, I’ll still manage.”

The shadow glanced at me and started sipping at my drink again.

Rila still seemed wary of Serafin and didn’t speak in front of her.

“Heeey, Roland! I’m here!” Tallow announced, barging in without knocking.

“*Why* are you here?”

“You weren’t at the inn the guild picked for you, so I assumed you were at the castle. I just had to thank you.”

“You should thank Serafin.”

“But you brought her to me.”

“Mr. Roland simply can’t take a compliment. Really now!” Serafin said in exasperation as she motioned for Tallow to join us in drinking.

Serafin paid close attention to everything concerning the guild and its future. She seemed to hang on Tallow’s every word.

“It’s good to have a guy like you around who can handle the on-site stuff. A guy who isn’t a noble, I mean,” I said.

“Hmm? Did you just praise me, Roland?”

“No.”

Serafin giggled to herself.

We spent quite a bit of time lounging, but ultimately, I decided to leave.

“If anything happens, ask Serafin for help, Tallow. And you, Serafin, make sure to give him advice.”

With their agreement, I could depart the castle without worry.

“*So are you done?*”

“I’ve said what I needed to and found people to handle the job.”

“*That is not what I mean. I am sure it has been a long while since you spoke with them in person.*”

“We can meet again anytime. I don’t know when I’ll die, but I feel that it’ll be

a while yet.”

“All right,” Rila said. “Then you would do well to return home soon. Having the shadow drink for me is not satisfying at all.”

“I’ll take a Gate home in a bit. Get something to drink ready while you wait for me.”

The shadow disappeared.

I’d have to stay with Rila tonight until she was worn out.

If Tallow had heard of the demon lord’s revival, there were undoubtedly other humans who had caught wind of it, too. Hell was likely alive with rumors.

Rila’s father, the former demon lord, already knew his daughter was alive thanks to a report from Roje.

What would happen if an event forced Rila to return to Hell? If there were a problem only she could solve, would the collar prevent her from doing so?

“ ... ”

Sharing a drink with Serafin must have made me overemotional.

My thoughts turned to the old days during the war.

When I returned home, Rila was fully prepared and waiting.

“Excellent job on your business in the capital! Now we shall drink.”

Rila brought me a glass of wine and a plate of cheese in the living room.

When I sat down on the sofa, she sidled up immediately. We clinked our glasses and imbibed quietly.

“*Whew...* This is good wine,” I said.

“Is it?” Rila asked, inspecting the bottle.

“You didn’t try any while I was out?”

“No. I do partake on my own occasionally, but I much prefer your company,” she admitted smoothly.

“Listen, about the collar... It’s almost done. Are you still sure about this?”

“Why must you ask so often? I enjoy my life here. I find my status and power in Hell tedious.”

“If you say so.”

Rila stared at me as though viewing something unusual.

“You are a wonderful person...” She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed, then tousled my hair. “Were you worried I might wish to return home?”

“Of course not.”

“I know you can never be straightforward. Hee-hee. I will not take your words at face value.”

Rila grinned. There was a keen genuineness to the expression.

“Are you already drunk?”

“Not even close.”

Rila twisted her thin, pale legs around me and brought her glass to her lips. “I have ensnared the very assassin who was after me... Oh, what a crime it is to be this beautiful.” Her words were dramatic, and she got more into the act as she went along. “Now you can no longer live without me... And so on and such. You are a wonderful man.”



“I’m pretty sure I took *you* prisoner first.”

“Y-you’re mistaken!”

Rila huffed and turned away, proud and capricious as ever.

7

A Certain Adventurer's Second Life

Iris approached while I handled some of my usual work at the office.

"Your lecture was well received."

"Oh, really?"

All I did was explain my usual practices, like Tallow asked. I didn't know if it went well, so I was pleased to hear it had.

"The guild master would like to ask you to do it again."

"I'm no teacher. I'm a humble guild worker... And I'm not very... Um..."

"Rila told me. You're not great with crowds, right?"

I couldn't believe she blabbed about that...

"No. I'm just not used to it, and I don't intend to do it again."

"Hmm. Then I'll make sure you don't have to."

Iris laughed and returned to her office, evidently in good humor.

I gave two lectures, each about an hour long. At most, they'd send a small ripple through the guild. Serafin joining Tallow would have a far greater impact by comparison.

When Almelia eventually took the throne, Serafin would likely step up to help her from the shadows.

"Mr. Roland, it's break time. Let's go out to lunch. Please?" Milia stood, looking practically overjoyed to invite me.

"I'm sorry. Rila asked me to come home today."

She'd intended to prepare a boxed lunch for me but made so many mistakes she gave up. In the end, she yelled, "Argh! I shall make you lunch here, so come

back later!” Her expression seemed half fraught with despair.

“Oh... That’s too bad.”

Milia’s shoulders slumped.

“Another time, though,” I said, then I left the office through the back door.

To my surprise, there was a woman crouched on the ground by the exit, clutching her knees to her chest.

Her shoulders trembled. She was crying.

“...”

If I remember right, she’s...

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh... Mr. Argan...” She raised her head, and I recognized her as Miu Lorr. She was an intermediate adventurer in her midtwenties. Milia was close with Miu and often helped her out.

“This isn’t the entrance for adventurers,” I told her.

“I know...”

Milia had asked me for advice about Miu once before, so I had an idea why she was brooding here. She had been a mage learning magic in the capital, but quit to become an adventurer.

“Miss Milia told me about what happened. You shouldn’t let it bother you too much.”

“You really think so?”

One of Miu’s quests, one that Milia believed her friend could handle easily, went awry.

In times of failure, there was nothing to do but learn and move on. That’s how I saw it anyway, but Miu took things very seriously.

Despite taking lower-rank quests, she often overthought situations and froze up while out on the job. This caused the failures to pile up.

Her first botched quest became a traumatic sticking point, and it left her

afraid to repeat the same mistake. That, on top of the pressure to succeed at easier quests, formed a vicious cycle of repeat losses.

“You might try questing alongside a friend or slowly working your way up from some F-rank quests.”

Miu shook her head. “That’s not the issue... I’ve thought about doing that, but... As soon as I enter the guild, I feel nauseous... I can’t even use my magic properly anymore...”

Her voice quivered as she spoke. Tears threatened to run down her cheeks at any moment.

Apparently, this had really taken a toll on her mentally. Miu’s distress over her failures had robbed her of her ability to cast magic.

“Shall I call Miss Milia over?”

Miu shook her head again. “She’s been so nice to me. I can’t let her see me like this... I’d be mortified...”

It was undoubtedly the guilt of messing up multiple quests Milia had picked out specifically to help fix Miu’s predicament. I wondered how suddenly being unable to use one of my abilities would feel. I was perfectly happy with one arm, my skill worked fine, and I still remembered the art of assassination. Losing a limb didn’t hinder my work, but if it did...

...I might be no different than Miu.

“May I have some of your time?” I asked her.

“Huh?”

I offered her my left arm, which she accepted, and I pulled her up.

“I’d like you to accompany me somewhere.”

I whisked Miu away through a Gate while the tears were still wet on her face.

“This place...” Miu looked all around, stunned by the abrupt change of scenery.

“I used a type of transportation magic to bring us here. This is an orphanage.”

Children could be heard from inside.

“An orphanage...?”

“Yes, and the staff needs help, so they’re currently looking to recruit. Do you like children?”

“Yes...”

“That’s good to hear.”

I still didn’t, though.

I took Miu inside, and we ran into Almelia in the hallway.

“Oh, Roland.”

Miu looked between the two of us several times.

“What? Huh? Y-Your Highness...? Wh-What are you doing here...?”

I decided to save explaining the details for later.

“Almelia, have you solved your worker shortage yet?”

“No, not at all,” she said with a sigh. Then she narrowed her eyes at Miu.
“Who’s this?”

“Miss Miu Lorl. Her current situation prevents her from adventuring at the moment. I thought she could help out here.”

I assumed Almelia would be fine with it, and although she looked bewildered, she didn’t refuse the idea.

“Miss Miu, is that something you’d be okay with?” I asked.

“Y-yes. Since I can’t adventure, I can’t make a living.”

“Good.”

A smile formed on Almelia’s face as she listened, and she clapped her hands.
“I understand. Miss Miu, I can explain how we do things here, so please follow me.”

“All right.”

I tagged along after the two women. Almelia led us to the orphanage director’s office—her office. It was a cluttered mess and documents were spread all over her desk.

“Almelia, why is your office so messy?”

“I already know you’re going to say it’s a reflection of my disorderly mind, right? I get it. But I’m just so busy...”

Almelia cleared off part of a table and a sofa, then offered the seats to us so we could discuss business.

“Miss Miu, this job can be frighteningly hard, so make sure you’ve prepared yourself.”

“I—I will. I was an adventurer, so I think I should be able to manage.”

Thunk, thunk. There was a loud knock at the door.

“Director!”

“Heeero!”

Children’s excited voices came from the other side.

“Urk?! They’re here! Roland, tell them I’m out. C’mon, please! As soon as I give them any attention, they all hang around in my office, and I can’t get any work done.”

Miu laughed quietly.

With no other option, I opened the door.

“Direc... Huh?”

“Hero... Wait, who’re who?”

The kids looked me up and down with serious expressions, and tears formed in their eyes. They’d expected Almelia, but instead, there were met by an unfamiliar man. They shrieked and made a break for it.

I heard Almelia laugh behind me.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha. Pfft. Nice work, Roland...”

“Yes, I’m a riot with the kids,” I said sarcastically, which got a smile from Miu.

We returned to talking business and discussed the salary Miu would need to get by.

“I need to go back and forth between here and the orphanage, but I’d like you

to stay here and live with the kids, Miss Miu.”

“That would be fine with me.”

“I can’t promise incredible pay, though... Does two hundred and fifty thousand rins sound all right?”



“That much?”

“That’s quite a bit.”

“Huh? It’s only two hundred fifty thousand. Is that really a lot...?”

A salary like that on top of free lodging...

It was more than what I made at the guild.

“It seems the princess doesn’t know the value of money,” I remarked.

“O-of course I do. Don’t rub your experience in my face just because you know a little bit about living as a civilian,” Almelia snapped.

“I don’t just know a little about civilians—I live as one.” I looked to Miu, who nodded at me. “How many more staffers do you need?” I inquired.

“Right... I think I could support three more. The castle officials say I have additional personnel funds.”

“We can never be sure when an adventurer will be put out of commission, like how I lost my arm. There’s plenty of potential causes—loss of an ability, physical or mental ailments, and even natural aging. I can introduce you to some adventurers, Almelia. After I vet them, of course.”

“If you’re the one selecting them, then sure.”

“Great. I’m sure they’ll be glad for the work.”

“Mr. Argan, are you certain about letting me have this job?”

“I am. You’ll do well in this role. That you feel so much pressure proves that you’re kind, hardworking, and carry a strong sense of responsibility. You also know magic and have experience as an adventurer. As it happens, one of the kids, a genius mage, intends to teach the other children magic...”

Almelia shook her head in exasperation. “Those lessons haven’t been going well. She explains things in sound effects and no one’s been able to follow along. Even I have trouble keeping up with Lina’s lessons.”

I suspected that might be the case.

“And there you have it. If you have some time, please teach them as well.”

“Okay.”

Miu would probably do well in that role.

“I’d like to introduce you to the children, Miss Miu.”

“Oh, all right.”

The two women stood and left the office to head to the yard. I bid them farewell.

“I’ll be returning to my own job.”

“Okay. See you later, Roland.”

“Thank you, Mr. Argan.”

I shook my head.

“Please don’t thank me. I simply saw talent and couldn’t bear to let it go to waste.”

Miu bowed her head.

“There is no expiration date on your adventurer permit, so don’t feel like you have to take quests. I’m sure Miss Milia will miss you, but she’ll be glad knowing you’re happy.”

“I sure hope so.” Miu laughed, undoubtedly thinking of her friend at the guild office.

“We’ll be waiting if you ever decide to try adventuring again,” I said.

I’d retired from being an assassin and found my calling as a guild worker, and adventurers could find second lives, too.

The wisdom, abilities, and experience one accrued were good for more than a single career.

◆Miu◆

The rest of the day was a flurry of commotion, as Almelia the hero-princess introduced the children to Miu. The first day was packed enough to make the

new hire's head spin, what with minding the kids, cleaning, and doing all sorts of odd chores.

"Every once in a while, one of the farmer ladies comes by to give us vegetables and play with the children, but there's still so much to deal with that it's hard to keep up," Almelia confessed once things settled down in the evening.

"Um... Princess Almelia, what sort of relationship do you have with him?"

"Huh?! Y-you mean me and Roland?!" Almelia squeaked loudly and blushed in a charming sort of way. The invincible hero was just as vulnerable as anyone else when it came to love.

Miu laughed quietly at the innocent reaction.

"W-we're just...friends? He's my teacher? That's all. But there's much more to it, too!"

Evidently, Almelia was in deep.

"Miss Miu... There's nothing between you and Roland, is there?"

"No. I haven't interacted with him much except at the guild."

"I—I see. Hmm."

Almelia looked relieved.

Roland had spoken casually with Almelia, suggesting he was a teacher of sorts to the princess. Surprisingly, Lina, another famous member of the party of heroes, also helped out around the orphanage, possibly because Almelia ran it.

"Did Roland leave already?"

Lina, known publicly as a great mage, also spoke of Roland like she was very familiar with him.

"Umm... H-he said he'll come by again soon. It's all right, Lina."

"Roland always goes home straightaway... I wanted to talk with him..."

"I'll tell him that next time."

"...Okay."

Almelia stroked Lina's cheek, and the young girl's eyes narrowed in contentedness. Miu likened her to a small rabbit.

Later, she learned that Lina came from an orphanage and that Roland taught her to use magic, which wasn't too surprising.

"Just who is Mr. Argan...?"

Milia typically arranged quests for Miu, so she lacked a clear picture of the man.

In time, she no longer felt anxious when reflecting on her time as an adventurer.

She liked the children and playing with them, too. Sometimes, they got in the way of the chores and kept Miu from getting anything done, but she felt fulfilled regardless. There was a time when she'd searched for a master to teach her magic. Now, however, she didn't feel like she needed to be able to cast spells.

"And then you collect it all together like *whoooooosh*. Yeah, like *whoooooosh*."

Lina's explanations of magic were so dependent on intuition that no one could follow along. Miu suspected Lina was attempting to describe mana convergence in the body, but she wasn't certain.

Lina could produce some incredible spells, yet had likely never studied the basics.

"Lina, would it be all right if I taught a little?"

"Okay..."

"Miu-miu can do magic, too?" an energetic boy asked, although his tone sounded a bit mocking.

"Magic is difficult, you know," added a precocious girl.

Honestly, Miu wondered if she could still manage it herself. She began by sparking her mana. This sensation was different for everyone, but to Miu, describing it like combustion fit perfectly.

The familiar sensation felt nostalgic.

A small flame equivalent to the amount of mana she'd gathered sprang to life on her open palm.

""""Wow!""""

"Hee-hee. See, I can do it. It's super easy, and I can teach you all how."

Thus began Miu's classes on magic. She might have been a third-rate mage, but she understood the fundamentals and had the knowledge and craft down.

If it helped the kids, she didn't mind putting in the extra effort to instruct them.

After about a month, Roland stopped in to see how things were progressing.

"How's life at the orphanage?"

"It's busy and fulfilling every day."

"Good to hear." Roland showed a hint of a smile.

"Yes, it is," Miu agreed on reflex.

This man was normally cool and expressionless, but he finally showed her a grin, one that bloomed like a flower.

He wasn't bad looking, either, so it packed a punch.

"Hmm... I see..."

"Is something the matter?"

"Oh, no," Miu said evasively.

"Roland, play house with me later," Lina insisted. She'd been glued to Roland's side since he arrived.

"Play house? What would you have me do?"

"Be the dad."

"Ah, the paternal role... All right. I think I understand enough to pull it off. A father, huh? I've never used that knowledge, since it all ended before I took his place. I didn't expect to give a performance here."

"Yay!"

Lina had to be around ten, but there was something persistently naive about her. Girls her age usually began concerning themselves with fashion or boys, but she conducted herself more like a five-or six-year-old.

“Then I’ll be your little sister,” Lina said.

“My sister?”

“Yeah. And we’ll talk about az-sets and distro-buu-shuns.”

“Oh-ho. It seems you’ve learned a thing or two, Lina.”

Miu couldn’t tell whether Roland was kidding or serious.

“Is something the matter?”

“No. I was noting another one of your charming aspects,” Miu replied, purposefully ambiguous. Roland tilted his head, confused. “How’s Milia?”

“She’s doing wonderfully. She was thrilled to learn you’re working here.”

“I see.”

Miu hoped to talk with her friend again.

Milia was such a kind person. She went to great lengths to help Miu even when her work as an adventurer had started to slip and she became less useful.

Miu felt bad that she never said so much as a good-bye when she left.

Surprisingly, she didn’t have to wait too long for her chance.

“Miss Miu!” called a familiar voice while the adventurer-turned-orphanage-staffer played with the children in the yard. Miu lifted her head to see that Roland had brought someone along with him today.

“Milia!”

The two ran to each other and shared an embrace. Milia began crying into Miu’s shoulder.

“Miss Miuuuuuu! I’m sooooo glad! You look so much happier!”

“It’s all thanks to Mr. Argan.”

“I heard everything!”

Miu told the children to play without her, and she took Milia and Roland to her bedroom.

It was a plain living space furnished with only a bed, table, and two chairs. Miu sat on the bed and offered the chairs to her guests.

“You could have told me you wanted to quit. I’d have understood,” Milia blurted out. “You always looked so worried... It was obvious something was wrong, and I wanted to help...”

“I’m sorry, Milia. And thank you for worrying about me. It’s all right now.”

“Rolaaand!” Lina called. He gave Miu and Milia a nod and then left.

The two women chatted about recent events until Miu recalled something she wanted to ask her friend.

“Milia, just who is Mr. Argan?”

“Mr. Roland? He’s my junior at work.”

“That’s not what I mean... Did he teach Her Highness? It’s pretty clear that the great mage Lina adores him...”

“Mr. Roland seems to know a lot of people. He makes friends so easily.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure... But why does it matter?” Milia had been crying before, but now her eyes glowed like stars. “He’s mysterious, cool, and awesome. Plus, he’s a gentleman...”

Miu sighed as though realizing she was too late.

“Milia, I don’t think you should pursue Mr. Argan.”

The guild worker pouted. “Why not?”

“Well, because...”

The princess is in love with him.

Though Milia’s looks were nothing to scoff at, she was still a typical village girl when compared against Almelia.

“Oh, I get it. You’ve fallen for him, too, haven’t you? Well, you can’t have Mr.

Roland.”

“You’ve got it wrong.”

“Are you trying to eliminate your rivals? Plenty of adventurers have tried, but it won’t work on me.”

“Have you told him how you feel?”

Milia’s face went scarlet. “In a roundabout method... I was just so embarrassed that I confessed in a way he wouldn’t notice...”

“There’s no point unless he gets the picture.”

“Ugh... B-but...if he rejects me, I can never go back to work!”

“You can do it. I’m sure you can, Milia!”

“At least one of us believes in me.”

“Come on, don’t talk like that.”

The two shared a laugh.

“Since you’re both off of work today, you should invite him out to eat after this,” Miu suggested.

“Uh. L-let’s not talk about that... I mean, I was already planning to, but it makes me nervous...”

The two women returned to the yard and exchanged a determined look.

“M-M-M-Mr. Roland!”

“Yes?”

“W-would you care to...go to dinner tonight...with me?”

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind.”

Miu watched as Milia lit up brighter than a starry sky.

Milia gave Miu a thumbs-up, which she returned. She saw off Roland and the overjoyed Milia, who was practically skipping, with a smile.

“I hope it goes well.”

The princess had done a lot for Miu, so she couldn’t help but feel guilty for

cheering Milia on.

8

The Finished Product

“Time has not improved the gloom of this place.”

“Of course not. He’s a vampire.”

Rila and I used my day off to visit Wawok’s studio—that’s what he called the cavern in his letter. A few days prior, a message had arrived informing us that the new collar was complete. Rila still didn’t show any qualms about this, but I couldn’t help but question the decision to seal her powers again.

“Someone might need your help,” I said.

“I do not care. I am sure they would only seek me out because they desire the power that comes from my reputation as demon lord. Power is the seed that leads to strife. If I can seal it away, then I shall.”

She was right about that.

I’d found Wawok’s studio by swimming through a flooded tunnel, but Dey and Roje had reached it via a dry passage. Rila and I came by that route today.

“Then would you like to accompany me and act as my collar? I’m no match for you, after all. If anything were to happen, you could quickly—”

“I don’t have that much free time on my hands, and I don’t care what goes on in Hell.”

Rila couldn’t go back to her homeland anyway. Her father and other demons still loyal to her were there.

“’Tis fine, then. Though you worry for me losing my power once more, I harbor no concerns over it.”

Rila seemed optimistic things would work out.

We continued down the corridor into Wawok’s studio proper.

“Why, hello, Roland, my boy. Oh...and Her Majesty the demon lord, too, I suppose.”

“Wawok, how long has it been since I met you in person? Regardless, it is a pleasure to see you.”

Rila flourished her long skirt and brushed aside her red hair.

Anyone else who conducted themselves so dramatically would’ve been laughed out of the room. However, Rila overflowed with self-confidence and dignity that made it look natural.

“Don’t expect me to prostrate myself before you. I’m not one of your cronies.”

“I know. I am pleased and grateful you made my collar.”

“...”

Wawok’s expression clouded over. Perhaps he had difficulty accepting Rila’s words.

“Well, Roland, she’s slightly different from what I remember of the demon lord... I recall her being more intelligent, levelheaded, and heartless...”

“Just pretend she’s some masochist who wants to wear a collar.”

“I see...”

Rila stomped her foot. “You see what exactly?! Your comments deprive me of my dignity!”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“Grrr...”

Wawok chuckled.

“Even the high-handed demon lord is reduced to a maiden before the man she loves.”

“Grrr...” Rila’s face turned red, but she couldn’t refute the vampire’s remark. “I wash my hands of this!” she said, flourishing her skirt again. To escape the conversation, she wandered around the studio. She must have been curious about this place for a while.

Wawok chuckled again quietly. “Who would have thought that love would bring down the demon lord where hatred and justice couldn’t? What incredible irony.”

“Just don’t tell anyone about her,” I said.

“You don’t have to tell me. I’d hate for you to be upset with me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Why, your missing limb. You have the ability to defeat a demon lord, yet you only have one arm. That’s such a waste.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you already that one arm is more than enough for my work.”

“*Ahem.*” Rila cleared her throat and muttered, “I like the collar because it serves as one of my accessories.”

Wawok clearly found that remark amusing. “How adorable. Is she always like this?”

“When it comes to the collar, yes. She wants to seal her powers, but she also likes it as something to wear.”

“When did the demon lord become a heartsick girl...? You’re one terrifying person, you know.”

“I might be more powerful than the demon lord, but I don’t have many opportunities to use my strength.”

“That isn’t what I mean. Might could do this to her, ah, but enough of this subject,” Wawok said. “I research monster abilities and amplify them so they can change... So they can evolve. I think it’s a shame to go through life without knowing your latent abilities.”

Apparently, that was what those glyphs were for.

After many long years researching the mechanisms behind mana amplification, suppression, and control, Wawok achieved his desired result with the Armored Turtle and Spiny Lizard we’d encountered awhile back.

“I can say the same of you, Roland.”

“That you’re disappointed I’ve lost the abilities that I once had, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“They weren’t abilities a guild employee needed. A single arm seems perfectly suited to me.”

“But that’s just what you’re telling others, right?”

My heart skipped a beat. It felt as though Wawok saw right through me.

“There’s no way that someone who trained so hard—whether it was originally to defeat the demon lord or not—has no interest in power.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I am a man as well, and it comes with the territory to want to grow stronger.”

“Having too much power is the seed that leads to strife,” I said, echoing Rila.

“Well, sure...”

If Rila was going to seal her strength away by choice, then I could get by with one arm. Neither of us needed to be powerful anymore.

“Just think it over,” Wawok said, handing me the completed collar. “This one should be as easy to use as the last. I looked into why the collar broke in the first place, and the biggest factor was physical deterioration. I did make it two thousand years ago on a lark, after all. But to make sure that doesn’t happen again, I’ve cast a spell on it and also used techniques to prevent degradation and ward against external physical damage.”

I examined the new collar, but couldn’t spot any difference except for the fresher leather.

“So it won’t come off, crumble, or break this time?”

“That’s right.”

I dropped the collar into my breast pocket and shook Wawok’s hand.

“Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t be thanking me—you’re the hero who defeated the demon

lord and deceived her subjects. And she wants the collar only so she can live with you. Oh, but if you feel indebted to me, why not allow me to study your body?”

“My body? I don’t mind.”

“Really?”

Rila, who’d been looking around the studio for a while, shot a look to communicate that she was waiting for me.

“Sorry. How about next time? Looks like she’s bored of your studio.”

“That’s a shame. Come back soon.”

After we said our good-byes, Rila and I left together.

“Here’s the new collar.”

“Oh-ho.”

When I handed it to Rila, she looked it over carefully, turning it in her hands. I explained the differences to her, but she didn’t seem particularly interested.

“So the most important thing of note is that this one’s more powerful than the last,” she said.

“That’s right. Rila, we don’t need to put it on you right now. You can wait until you feel it’s necessary.”

“Hmm.”

“No one who’s sensed the demon lord’s power has tried to seek you out yet. In your current state, I think you’ll be able to tell beforehand if anyone were to come.”

“I suppose that is true, but...”

“And I guess you could put it on when you really want to transform into a cat.”

“Transforming is useful. Anywhere you go, I can hide in your bag and accompany you. Traveling with me in that manner is much easier, is it not?”

“There are advantages.”

Rila took my hand at some point, and I didn't mind.

"I am glad."

"About what?"

"That you care enough to give me so much counsel on the collar."

"That makes you happy?"

Rila nodded twice.

After checking that there was no one else in the passage, she stood on her tiptoes and leaned in close to my face. I brought my lips to hers in answer. The gentle sound reverberated in the underground corridor. Once we parted, Rila turned forward, hand still clasping mine. I could tell she was grinning.

The Secret Messenger from the Holy Land of Rubens

The incident happened as I was eating breakfast.

“Knave.”

“What?”

“Do you have any idea where my back scratcher is?”

“No.”

“Hmm, I see.” Rila tilted her head and returned to the living room.

She still hadn’t put on the collar yet. I couldn’t tell if it was because she’d listened to my advice or merely one of her whims.

I guess it did take some courage to put it on, considering it would never break and couldn’t be removed.

“I am sure I set it down here.” Rila had come back and was pointing at the table.

“You think the back scratcher grew legs and ran off, then?”

“That seems like a possibility...”

“I was joking—that’s definitely not what happened.”

“The scratcher is your right arm, though.”

“Even my arm wouldn’t grow legs.”

After having her fill of fun toying with my right arm, Rila grew bored and relegated it to a back scratcher. She wanted to fix it at some point, but as I told Wawok, a single arm didn’t hinder my work, so I didn’t need my missing one reattached.

“What’s it matter if it’s lost?” I asked. “If you didn’t preserve it with magic, it would’ve rotted down to the bone by now anyway.”

“That’s true,” Rila replied, although she continued to search.

I told her I was leaving, yet she didn’t come to the door to see me off. Evidently, she was too distracted. She must have really cared for that back scratcher.

Work proceeded as normal. While I handled some miscellaneous tasks, someone called to me from the front entrance.

“Master Roland!”

It was Lyan, the beastwoman, hopping and waving at me. Behind her were the other three members of the pretty girl squad.

“Oh, you’re back,” I said.

I’d asked them to guard Maylee in Bardenhawk. I relieved them of that duty when the broadscale quest ended, but they took a liking to the young princess and remained at the castle for a while longer.

The members of the pretty girl squad hurried over to me. I didn’t know whether it was because of their presence specifically, but the atmosphere in the office lightened upon their arrival.

“You’re always so quick to shout, Lyan,” Su, the elf, chided after a sigh.

“I’m just happy to see Master Roland after so long.” Lyan’s hands, ears, and tail wouldn’t stop moving; they were as uncontrollable as her excitement.

“Master Roland’s so calm and cool, like he always is...,” whispered Sanz, the dwarf, from beside Lyan.

Eelu, the only human in the group, grinned. “I’m just happy to see you’re doing well.”

“And I you,” I responded.

I offered my hand to shake in commemoration of our reunion, but all four girls went for it at once.

“Hey! I was talking to Master Roland just now, so—”

“But he was looking at me.”

“...At the very least, he wasn’t trying to shake your hand, Lyan.”

“Or yours, either, Sanz.”

The four quickly descended into an argument, so I gave each of them a handshake in turn.

“Thank you for your work. You did a great job.” I praised them all while trying to keep each remark impartial. If I didn’t treat them equally, they’d try to outdo each other and wind up arguing.

I had them take seats, which began another quarrel about who would sit in front. Once it was settled, I took their report on what had happened while they were away.

“So are you here for a quest today?”

“No. Not for that.” Eelu gave me a slow shake of her head and signaled something to Sanz with her eyes.

“Master Roland... Does your arm hurt?” The dwarf spoke in her typical monotone way, like she wasn’t truly interested.

“No, not at all.”

“...Not that one. The right arm.”

That one did hurt sometimes. Apparently, it was a phenomenon called phantom limb pain, but it wasn’t so terrible that I couldn’t stand it.

“Sanz insists that it must hurt and won’t listen to us,” Su added.

“It does. Not horribly, or anything. It’s not worth worrying over.”

“Okay, then.”

I ruffled Sanz’s hair, which set the other three on edge.

“Master Roland is completely fine. I’m sure he’ll grow a new one.”

“Come on, Eelu, I can’t do that.”

“Huh? You really can’t?” Eelu looked absolutely shocked, which left me shocked as well.

“I don’t have any healing abilities like that.”

The girls wanted to convert all the money they’d earned in Bardenhawk, so I figured it was a good time to pay their reward for participating in the broadscale quest, too.

I handed a bag stuffed with a wad of banknotes to Eelu.

“What? Whaaat?! Th-that’s so much money!”

The others gathered to look and reacted in much the same way.

“I’m gonna use this to buy Master Roland a new arm.”

“Don’t talk like my limb’s an accessory.”

“Lyan... We won’t need to work for a few months with this much...”

“Not having to go on adventures is kind of a downer. We won’t see Master Roland.”

“That...would be a problem...”

While Lyan and Sanz discussed this, Eelu and Su communicated something with their eyes.

“Is something wrong?” I questioned.

“Oh... Well, actually—”

Before Eelu could explain, Su cut in, “It’s okay, Master Roland, it’s nothing. I’m sure it must be a mistake.” That was all she offered before going quiet.

Some adventurers arrived looking for quests, so I had to send the pretty girl squad off.

I was curious about that odd exchange with Eelu and Su, but didn’t think much of it.

Nothing special happened that day other than the pretty girl squad’s return.

As I was headed home that night, I spotted a rather good-looking horse hitched out front of the house.

“Who do you belong to?”

I patted the animal’s muzzle gently, and it whinnied. Roje had likely ridden it

here.

It wasn't until I heard voices inside that I started to doubt that.

"I do not know what reason brought you to us, but you are a good person."

"I'm only doing this because you asked me to help you find it."

I heard Rila talking with someone, and I recognized the other speaker. I opened the door to a room we normally left empty.

"I'm home," I said.

Rila's face lit up. "Oh, you have returned at the perfect time."

"Oh, Roland. Took you long enough," said Elvie, hand on her hip and a rather peeved look on her face.

"What're you here for?" I inquired.

"That's no way to greet someone."

Almelia must've told her where I lived.

Elvie cleared her throat to set the conversation in a new direction. "I apologize for the terribly uncouth circumstances surrounding the engagement meeting between Almelia and the prince of my homeland. Thanks to you, His Majesty avoided corrupt temptation."

"So stuffy... You are much too stuffy in the way you thank him..." Rila shook her head. Evidently, she found this whole affair tedious.

"Don't tell me you came just to look for my arm?"

"Elvie, the knight, arrived conveniently when I was in need of assistance," Rila said. "That foolish elf is nowhere to be found... It was the perfect timing."

Elvie was quick to clarify.

"I only happened to visit while Madam Rileyla, your lodger, was having a bit of trouble..."

"I realize that strict discipline is in your nature, but please relax. Even as a bystander, I feel so uptight that I can hardly breathe," I commented.

"Would that I was able. Perhaps it would save me from enduring so many

hardships.”

Elvie hadn’t changed one bit. We decided to share dinner.

I also thanked Elvie for warning me about the dangerous drugs a while ago.

“I suspected they were coming in through one of Felind’s ports, but I didn’t expect you to destroy the trade entirely. Drug circulation has ceased completely thanks to you.”

I decided not to linger on the topic. Rila was here, and the conversation probably brought up some unpleasant memories.

“I’m guessing you didn’t come all this way to see me,” I said.

“Of course not.” Elvie paused, clearly choosing her words carefully. “The last time we met, I knew you withdrew from your previous line of work to become a guild employee, and Almelia has since told me of your arm.”

“You don’t have to be so delicate about it. Get to the point.”

“King Rubens has passed.”

The atmosphere grew slightly tense. Rila, in particular, seemed on edge. She’d likely deduced why Elvie was here.

“I believe news has yet to spread to this country.”

“If you’re telling me this, his death can’t have been from illness or accident.”

Were it anything that benign, Elvie wouldn’t need to inform me.

“...The official report is that he died from a disease.”

“Officially,” huh?

“Now, see here, waif. Do not dare make any careless suggestions. Depending on what you say, you may not leave here in one piece.” Rila had murder in her eyes.

“Rila,” I called, signaling for her to stop with a look. She snorted irritably. “Elvie, just tell me what happened. There must have been something off about the king’s passing for a marquis’s daughter to ride all the way from Rubens.”

“As quick on the uptake as ever. I’m glad this conversation won’t take long...

His Majesty was likely assassinated. He was one to wield his power as he liked, so it's easy to imagine he had many enemies. However, I was the one in charge of his protection."

"And? There must have been a weakness in your defenses," Rila said.

I was the one who'd trained Elvie in the principles of security. I had taught her all she needed to know, whether it was protecting someone alone, in a group, or with dozens of people. Plus, I'd made certain she understood how to make a target more challenging or undesirable for assassins.

Elvie leaned in toward me. "There are very few who could accomplish this undetected. I'd like to hear your thoughts."

Rila let out a long, frustrated sigh. "That is what this is about? Your life has been narrowly spared. Had you accused him, you would be amongst the refuse by now."

"The thought crossed my mind, but Roland wouldn't kill for no reason."

"Yes. That's exactly right."

Elvie looked me straight in the eyes, then lowered her head. "Roland, please help me."

And so Rila and I headed off to Rubens with Elvie.

To hasten our journey, we went to the capital and informed King Randolph of the situation to borrow faster horses.

"You, Goody Two-shoes—during times like these, you must give people time to consider." Rila was offering Elvie some candid advice from her spot behind me.

After Elvie requested my help and bowed her head, she refused to budge until I agreed.

"To be honest, I couldn't think of anyone else to ask. If he said no, then the truth of His Majesty's assassination would never be uncovered."

"Really now. I know that you rely on him, but you should have tried to figure something out on your own. It's only reasonable. Ridiculous."

“The only thing I could do was find the man I knew I could count on and entreat him.”

“This reminds me of Roje. She is stubborn as well, though in an entirely different way, I suppose,” Rila remarked.

“Elvie’s always been like this,” I said. “Asking her to be a little more flexible is a fool’s errand.”

“Roland, please remember that I can hear you. This is simply my natural disposition. I doubt I shall ever budge on that.”

We hurried to Rubens while talking all the way.

The three of us stopped at inns twice to give the horses breaks before finally reaching Wegal, the capital of Rubens. I’d visited several times before the war, and it looked nearly the same.

“What type of nation is this place?” Rila inquired.

“Forty percent of the land is covered in steep mountains, and rivers cross the ranges,” I replied.

Elvie added, “That’s right. It’s smaller than Felind, but our eastern edge borders the sea, and our trade flourishes for it. We use the rivers to transport materials, as well. Our people are proud to be the greatest shipbuilders and navigators.”

This was also the place for sailors to study water and wind magic. Those who manned ships devoted themselves to learning how to create tailwinds and currents using magic and other techniques so vessels could travel faster.

“Oh-ho. You use rivers for transport? How resourceful.”

“And because the territory is relatively small, we’re able to ship products from the coast quickly. Even the capital has access to fresh seafood.”

“Fresh seafood!” I heard Rila swallow quietly.

Rubens maintained strict control over its waters, which kept pirates away. Transporting goods via caravan meant paying a share for the guards, but that was necessary.

I had explained Rila away as a housemate to Elvie. There was no telling whether she'd believed it, but she didn't press me on the subject.

"Roland, I know it's odd of me to ask, considering I requested your help, but what about your job?"

"That's not an issue. Do you remember how I left when we reached the inns?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"I used a Gate to jump and finished my duties at the office."

"I—I thought you took a break."

"I can't ask for days off out of nowhere, and I certainly couldn't explain the reason for my absence."

Elvie's shoulders slumped. I gave her a slight pat on the back.

"Don't worry about it."

"From what I gather, Iris goes very easy on you. If you worked for the demo—for me, I would not accept three-or four-hour workdays. I would fire you immediately."

"Iris knows to cut my pay based on the reduced hours. She's not giving me any special treatment."

"*Hmph,*" Rila snorted.

Elvie nodded in admiration. "Your job sounds like quite the ordeal."

"Is yours any different? Are you sure things will be okay with you gone? What about the rest of the royal family?"

"I was worried... But I believe there won't be multiple attacks, and the people I've left the royal family with are excellent. It was more critical that I get your aid."

Elvie was part of Rubens's aristocracy, so she managed a territory in a town southwest of Wegal. There were estates for the nobility in the capital, however, and that's where she currently lived.

When we left our horses in the stable, a person I believed to be a stableboy gave us a polite bow.

"Welcome home, my lady," he greeted. He patted the horses' necks to thank them for a job well done. Elvie handed him the reins to her steed, and I did the same with mine.

"I told you not to call me 'my lady,'" Elvie scolded.

"Yes, but normally we're..."

"I also said not to address me that way when I have guests."

Evidently, Elvie didn't care for being called a lady in front of others. Rila must have sympathized, for she nodded.

The boy looked between me and the two beautiful women. His face turned bright red when his eyes met Rila's.

"*Ahem*. Normally I would tell you to take it easy today, but in light of present circumstances, I'd like to show you a map of the incident to explain what transpired," said Elvie.

"Fine by me."

"Thank you."

Elvie, seemingly eager to leave the stables quickly, strode toward the manor gate. Rila glanced back at the boy, who waved at her.

"I am a sinful lady," she remarked.

"Yes," I agreed. "You've committed a terrible offense."

"Hee-hee," Rila laughed.

We passed through the gate and entered a symmetrical garden.

Two women I assumed were servants gave us deep bows at the door. As expected, they greeted Elvie with a simultaneous "Welcome home, my lady."

Elvie went as red as she had with the stableboy, and she reminded the maids to address her by name.

"I take no offense at the title," Rila assured.

"Yeah, I don't care what they call you, my lady," I added.

Elvie flushed deeper. "St-stop that. Don't tease me."

She took us to a guest room and had us wait while she left to retrieve something. When she returned, she was holding paper rolled into a tube, likely the blueprints of the castle.

“Very few people are permitted to keep these plans in their possession...” Elvie glanced at Rila as though she had more to say.

“There is no cause for worry. I cannot memorize a layout simply by looking at it. I do not mind if you show me. Go on.” Rila waved her hands in an exaggerated motion, urging Elvie to continue.

“Why does she act so high-and-mighty?” Elvie whispered to me.

“Because she’s basically royalty in another country.”

“I see...”

Thankfully, that explanation satisfied her. I technically didn’t give her the full truth, but this worked fine, since it wasn’t a total lie, either.

“Why does someone like her live with you?”

“It’s a long story.”

Elvie frowned. “According to Almelia, you have something called a ‘shared house’? Is that what this is? You’re not involved with her in a funny way, are you?”

“Define ‘funny’?”

Judging by her questions, Elvie wasn’t interested in Rila’s background so much as our relationship.

“Er, w-well...”

“You may tell the delicate maiden,” Rila announced. “Our relationship is most impure.”

“R-Roland?! I cannot believe you!”

Elvie turned scarlet and shot straight up.

“Calm down, Elvie, she’s teasing.”

Truthfully, Rila’s description of our relationship was accurate.

“I’m aware that you’re a womanizer,” Elvie grumbled.

“That’s not true... They come to me.”

“What’s the difference?! You really haven’t changed... In that way, at least.”

Evidently, Elvie found this exchange somewhat nostalgic—she suddenly laughed.

“Now back to the matter at hand.”

She spread the paper that had been rolled up in the tube. Its contents depicted the castle interior. Elvie told us about the guard situation just before King Rubens—his name was Mefis the Second—was killed.

Rila wasted no time ordering the servants around and telling them to bring booze.

“I was giving commands and making arrangements for the guards. Do you see any potential openings?” Elvie asked.

“I don’t. You’ve used the fewest number of people possible, but arranged them to cover one another’s blind spots.”

“In that case...”

“Were I the assassin...” I traced my finger along the castle plan to highlight the path of the hypothetical assassin. No one saw the king die. None were killed except the target. It was a clean, perfect job.

“...”

A feeling of wrongness built in me as I explained how it could have happened.

“I see... So *you* would have been able to do it that way,” Elvie said.

“...”

That was odd.

She’s right. I could do it.

The only route I saw was doable, but only with my skill, Unobtrusive.

Even if the true assassin used an ability that made them imperceptible, Elvie’s guard formation had no weaknesses. It was near impossible for any run-of-the-

mill assailant to succeeded without being spotted or killing a guard.

So what if someone with a great, rare skill had decided to do the deed?

Someone like that wouldn't choose to be an assassin in the first place. Most that lucky became thieves instead. A person with the power to turn invisible could steal money directly from multiple people. The same thing could be accomplished with a skill to disguise yourself as other people or objects. Few would choose to kill people with options like those, which meant they weren't cut out for assassination.

Once I had the whole story, it didn't seem so odd that Elvie suspected I was responsible for the king's death.

"...*Was it me?*"

Honestly, it was the only reasonable conclusion.

"Roland, wake up."

My eyes snapped open, and I saw Elvie.

"What happened?"

The room was dimly lit. Based on the weight of my eyelids, it was shortly after dawn.

Rila slept in the bed next to mine.

"It is alcohol from your own home! Why do you not drink it?!"

She'd imbibed heavily and ranted at Elvie while trying to force booze on the other woman.

Elvie had rejected the demon lord, though. *"No, thank you. I have to work tomorrow."*

Ultimately, I wound up keeping Rila company until she was done. When she woke up today, she'd have an awful headache and feel sick.

Transferring her to another bed despite her wanting to sleep in mine was the right call.

"I have morning training. I'd like you to observe," Elvie said.

“All right.”

Elvie waited patiently while I got changed.

“I heard that you lost your arm...protecting Almelia. Was the opponent that powerful?”

“Yes,” I answered.

Elvie seemed to infer something from my succinct reply. She didn’t inquire further.

We left the room and headed to the rear yard where training ordinarily took place. Elvie picked up one of the wooden swords leaning against the storage house.

As soon as she started her practice swings, she began to pant.

“Good form. Looks like you’re putting your all into each attack.”

“You said”—her sword cut through the air with a keen sound—“that training for a real battle means swinging with all I’ve got, just like genuine combat.”

“You remember well.”

Elvie’s straightforward and earnest personality was plain in her swings. Undoubtedly, she practiced every day.

“So...they keep you on as a guild employee even with your injury?”

“At the moment, it doesn’t seem to get in the way of my work.”

“I see. I-if you do quit, I’d like you to come to the Haydence family for whatever you need.”

“I doubt it will come to that... But if it does, then I will.”

“Y-yes. You should.”

The morning sun continued to rise, and eventually Elvie sighed deeply and ended her training. She accepted a towel from a maid and wiped away her sweat.

“I’m headed to the bath. Breakfast is ready, so she will guide you over... If you would please handle the rest.” She looked to the servant.

“Yes, my lady.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

The maid giggled quietly.

Though Almelia was, in fact, a lady, she was more often addressed as “Princess,” “Your Highness,” or “hero.” I wondered if being called lady would embarrass her, too.

“Right this way,” the servant said. She led me down a set of stairs, stealing glances at me, perhaps out of curiosity.

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh... How impolite of me. I’m sorry. After learning you’re *the* Master Roland, I just couldn’t help myself. Our lady has told us so much about you.”

“Is that right? And what has she said?”

“In broad terms, that she owes you her life and that you taught her to fight... Hee-hee-hee. I’m afraid I cannot tell you more.”

Apparently, Elvie was loved and adored by her staff.

After breakfast, I headed to the castle with Elvie.

“Only very few people within the palace know that His Majesty has passed,” Elvie explained.

“I understand. I won’t make any careless remarks.”

“Thank you.”

Once we arrived, Elvie headed to a room where the royal guards had gathered and ordered them to change shifts with those who’d worked all night.

Elvie went about her work without wasting time. She didn’t bother to introduce me, either. Several people eyed me suspiciously, but none of them asked questions.

“Commander, it seems that the senior officers plan to have a meeting in the council room... They’ve requested your presence,” stated a man who looked to be the assistant captain.

“All right. Thank you for informing me.”

He bowed, then left the room. We departed for the council chamber soon after.

“It’d be a great help if you were to attend as well, Roland.”

“I’ll chime in with an opinion as an expert on the subject matter, then.”

“I hope it’s a constructive meeting.” Elvie gave me a strained smile. “This makes the third one. We call them meetings, but they’re really just disputes between the various factions. Discussion is all about which of the many princes will succeed the king, and which person to back to protect personal interests—it’s all about vanity, power, and profits.”

Elvie sighed, seeming fed up with it all.

“It seems putting one’s personal interests first is a universal concept,” I remarked.

“And how,” Elvie muttered. She looked weary.

All seats in the conference chamber were taken save for one. The twenty or so gathered people, each an officer or civil official, looked at us when we arrived.

“I apologize for the delay.”

“Captain Haydence, who is this fellow?” questioned a mustached civil official for the group.

“He is very knowledgeable about assassinations and skills, and has won the hero’s respect. He’s...uhh... He’s a guild employee.”

The room almost burst into laughter at that.

I bowed slightly, then Elvie took her seat, and the man from earlier spoke again as though he represented the room. “Captain Haydence, we entrusted you with guarding His Majesty, yet the worst has come to pass. How do you think that affects us?”

“It...”

Pinning blame was common in meetings like this one.

“I plan to receive penalty or punishment, of course. But first, I’d like to come up with a countermeasure to make sure this never happens again.”

“You have fallen significantly since your glorious achievements while a member of the party of heroes,” someone mocked quietly.

“The marquis’s name has been dragged through the mud.”

Elvie bit her lip, yet stood strong against the barely whispered badmouthing.

“Captain Haydence, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I do not...”

Elvie was straightforward to the point of blunt frankness. She just wasn’t suited for a power struggle with everyone attempting to pull one another down.

“The same might happen after the new king takes the throne. Perhaps you should quietly resign?”

Before Elvie tried to reply, I patted her on the back.

This group had likely discussed ousting Elvie from her position prior to our arrival. And if I left things as they were, she’d accept that without a fight.

“Yes, Elvie does carry some responsibility for this.” As soon as I spoke, disgusted looks were cast my way. Were they that unhappy I’d ruined their plans for the meeting?

Elvie was the daughter of a marquis. The others at the meeting probably expected that removing her from her duty as royal guard captain opened a spot they could use to their advantage.

“However, she handled the situation perfectly. This would’ve occurred regardless of who led the guards.”

“Wait, Roland...”

Elvie looked at me, but I continued without minding her. “Are you familiar with the Siege of Castle Figoron? That was the battle where the party of heroes overcame the attack and protected Figoron right before it could fall.”

At the time, I was preparing to assassinate the enemy army’s commanding

officer and was off on my own.

“Only about two hundred strong remained within the castle, and they held firm for two days while ten thousand set upon them in waves. Elvie commanded the defense during that time.”

“That has nothing to do with current matters!” bellowed an angry man.

Elvie hung her head, as though agreeing. Her behavior suggested that she’d already given up.

“This castle is similar to Figoron in construction. They were both made in the Houlton style, which is seen often on mountaintops. Although the king’s shelter and his guard differed, I doubt Elvie would make an error the second time when she didn’t on the first.”

Now that she had someone taking her side, Elvie nodded twice.

“She arranged the guards just as she did at Figoron Castle.”

A strange atmosphere filled the room as I spoke. Based on the looks the officials traded, it seemed they were bewildered by the unexpected state of affairs.

“Regardless, the reality is that she failed to protect His Majesty!”

“That’s right! And it’s because she didn’t do a good enough job!”

Their mouths opened and closed like gasping fish.

“Perhaps you were the one who laid a hand on His Majesty?” someone suggested.

“Is the marquis attempting a coup?”

The members of the conference laughed.

I couldn’t let that slide.

“Enough with your insults!” When I raised my voice, half the officials fell out of their seats.

“Roland...”

No matter what Elvie said, the rest of the room would claim she’d failed,

hiding behind the excuse that the king was dead.

“She shoulders some responsibility for the king’s assassination, but not all of it. What kind of decent adults conspire to put a young lady through a witch hunt? Have you no shame?”

No one replied. They were too frightened, because some of my animosity had accidentally come through.

“Experts dedicate their lives to investigating these tragedies. Don’t try to force some misguided idea of what’s conventional on the situation.”

Demonstrating would be faster than explaining, so I invoked my skill and stole several glasses. I ended my little display by the wall on the far end of the room.

“With the right skill, a person could have done the deed without alerting anyone.”

A few of the gathered officials gasped in awe, while others stared at me with fear.

“You should focus on establishing a counterplan, not throwing blame around. Can we make this a more productive meeting?”

I returned the glasses and went back to Elvie’s side.

◆Rila◆

“My head...”

Rila awoke to a horrible experience—faint nausea and a headache.

“I feel terrible...”

She considered going back to sleep, but the revulsion in her stomach kept her up. The sunlight entering through the drawn curtains seemed dreadfully bright.

It was already afternoon.

“...”

Roland wasn’t in the bed next to hers. He regularly disappeared the day after she drank too much, perhaps because he knew she was in no condition to go

anywhere.

However, it left Rila feeling lonely. She expected him to look after her.

“Where did that knave go?”

Rila noticed a water jug and glass had been left on the bedside table, and partook.

“He is not here to rub my back...nor to allow me to rest my head on his lap... What a cold man... He should care for me like a beloved cat... That busy man...,” she grumbled while slowly trudging out of the room.

Rila passed servants who explained that Roland and Elvie had departed for the castle early in the morning.

“I believe they won’t return until dusk or later.”

Rila thanked the staff, deciding to return to bed.

“Hmm?”

To her surprise, Roland was waiting for her in the guest room. He looked around the room, unaware someone was watching him until he turned and saw Rila standing in the doorway.

“I did not know you had returned,” she said.

“...I have.”

There was no sign of the Goody Two-shoes, and Rila concluded that she and Roland split up.

“Did you learn anything about the incident?”

“Incident?”

Rila dropped her voice to a whisper. “Mm-hmm... About the king’s assassination.”

Roland laughed. Rila sensed something unusual the moment she saw him. However, it was challenging to pinpoint the exact cause.

“Of course I know about that... I was the one who did it.”

“Hmm? What do you—?”

Roland vanished.

“So you’re the demon lord,” said a voice at her back.

“Uh!”

Rila tried to move away, but her body was sluggish from drinking the night before. She couldn’t manage any spells in time, either.

A light smack on her neck, and her consciousness faded.

Before everything went dark, she realized what was wrong—this man had a right arm.



10

The Right Arm

“I’d like to thank you, Roland.”

When we left the meeting room, Elvie bowed to me.

“There are people watching. Stop that.”

I grabbed her cheeks with my hand in an attempt to lift her head back up.

“I fwank yoo fwom the bwuttum—”

Now I had no idea what she was saying.

I released her.

“Your lack of experience made this worse...”

The senior officials still filing out of the meeting room were curious about our conversation. I took Elvie’s arm and led her around a nearby corner.

“Listen, sometimes unexpected things happen. It’s great that you feel responsible as a guard, but you don’t need to tack all the blame on yourself.”

“...”

Elvie was close to tears.

“What?”

“I thought...that it was all my fault... No one ever told me it wasn’t.”

“All right, enough. Don’t cry. I don’t want to deal with it.”

“Y-you’re always like this! You push people away so coldly! And just when I thought you were being kind!”

She tried to push *me* away, but I batted her hand aside.

“Ow!”

“It’s clear those higher-ups are looking for a scapegoat. It’s less about you as an individual, and more what you stand for as the daughter of a marquis, a member of the party of heroes, and the influential captain of the royal guard. Those guys definitely see you as a regular obstacle. This incident was the perfect excuse to remove you.”

“How despicable...”

“Let me say it again—your inexperience made this worse.”

“Stop repeating it... You’re making me anxious...”

Just like Almelia, Elvie was also prone to nervousness. Sheltered lives made criticism harrowing for them both. The meeting, which had started as a witch hunt, did an about-face and turned into an inconclusive discussion about which prince would be crowned king.

All the officials had their favorites, and no agreement was reached.

“The assassin got through your defenses. We can’t underestimate that threat.”

No one made a single remark about the perpetrator during the meeting. The group only saw the attack as a way of unseating Elvie.

“Are all of Felind’s senior officers like that?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Some definitely are.”

Elvie had to return to her regular duties, and asked me to wait at her residence.

“I-I’ll be sure to come home before it gets too late! So...if we could eat dinner together...”

“All right. I’ll find a way to spend my time until then.”

“Mm-hmm. That’s a promise, right?”

“Sure.” I waved lightly to Elvie and left the castle, heading for her estate. Undoubtedly, all the servants were awake and active by now.

“Rila.” I peeked into the room, but no one was there.

“...”

She'd drunk some of the water; I saw that the pitcher and cup had been used. I assumed Rila would be in bed with a hangover, but I was mistaken. Perhaps she was wandering around town, then?

I asked a few servants, yet they didn't have any idea where she went.

"I did see you speaking with her when you returned earlier, however."

"When who came back?"

"When you did..."

"Me?"

"Yes." The servant nodded, mystified.

"..."

I'd been with Elvie since morning.

That meant someone who resembled me had spoken with Rila.

I went back to the room and stuck my hand into Rila's bedsheets.

"Still warm..."

Not much time had passed.

I doubted she was wandering the capital, sightseeing with my look-alike. Rila had good instincts. She'd likely realized it wasn't me immediately, especially if the person altered their face with magic or a skill. There was no evidence of a struggle. Was Rila taken somewhere before she discovered it wasn't me?

"But where...?"

Something knocked on the window outside—Rila's shadow.

If it was here, then...

I opened the window and the shadow entered, speaking with Rila's voice. *"You are being awfully hospitable. Do you truly believe you have me within your control?"*

"I don't intend to control you at all. You can relax as you'd like here."

The other voice that came through was mine.

Hearing my own voice when I wasn't speaking felt indescribably unpleasant.

"What happened to your right arm?"

"What happened? I've had it since birth."

Evidently, this look-alike hadn't mimicked my missing right arm.

"It has been some time since I have seen that skill. What a crafty trick it is."

"You're the only one who has seen Unobtrusive and lived, Rila."

Unobtrusive was called different things depending on who you asked. In my case, Amy decided on the name, and I adopted it in kind. It felt unlikely that someone else would give a skill in the same family an identical title.

Rila even said she hadn't seen the skill used in a while. It really had to resemble mine.

The more I learned about this opponent, the more he seemed identical to me.

"Maybe it really is me?"

My right arm... The one Rila used as a back scratcher...

Where was it now?

"Skree, skree."

The shadow pointed in a direction, presumably trying to lead me to Rila.

I put the shadow on my shoulder and dashed out of the estate.

I made my way through the twilit streets, following the shadow's directions.

When I approached a corner, the shadow screeched like grinding metal and thrust a finger out.

"..."

The double didn't seem to intend to harm Rila. What was he after? If "I" kidnapped Rila, then the king's assassination was...

The shadow pointed to the second floor of a dilapidated building. We were in a suburb pretty far from the castle and Elvie's estate.

Its duty now complete, the shadow vanished.

Not long ago, I had fought Amy, an incredibly powerful opponent. Now I would have to battle someone of the same level. Life was unpredictable.

I'd be able to tell whether he was actually "me" or an impostor once we clashed.

I felt something in the air coming from the ruined structure, as though my arrival had been detected. Blending into the surroundings wouldn't do much good now.

Rila said she was being treated well, but that had to be sarcasm.

I opened a creaky door and entered a hall that could have comfortably held twenty people.

The stairs had collapsed from rot, allowing a view of the floor above.

"Ah, you're here."

A man appeared from the shadows.

Black hair and dark eyes. He was slender, yet possessed muscle that allowed him to utilize his body expertly.

It was me—a perfect reflection.

The only difference was my missing right arm.

"Why'd you kidnap Rila?"

"She's asleep in a back room. It seems she's hungover. Don't worry. I haven't hurt her."

"What are you?"

"Can't you tell? I'm you."

I clicked my tongue.

How is this possible?

"I think I'll need to see it to believe it," I said cynically, exhaling through my nose.

"I suspected that's how this would play out," replied the other me.

"For having such keen intuition, you sure aren't smart. If you know what I'm

going to ask, then quit playing around and tell me who you are. You didn't grow out of my right arm." My remark was meant as a kind of joke, yet the faker's eyes widened.

"Now I'm surprised by *your* intuition. Are you absolutely sure I didn't?"

"You can't be serious."

This was a surprise.

"I thought it best to test my limits against the original."

For convenience's sake, I decided to name the impostor Dupe. Dupe picked up a rusted knife from the detritus, tossing it into the air before catching it. Then he found and took another blade.

"I almost feel compelled to humor your attempt to test your skills, you inferior copy."

"Whoever loses will be the inferior copy. And we'll learn who that is in a moment. Don't worry, I'll be excellent at whatever I do, whether its guild work, being a member of the party of heroes, or assassination."

I had no idea who would steal my arm, or why, but apparently, Dupe intended to replace me.

"And I'll take excellent care of Rila, too."

"Big talk for a newborn."

We went silent and the air between us grew strained. This felt nearly as heavy as the duel with Amy. A moment's distraction could mean my demise.

It was a fitting danger, considering I was up against myself.

I invoked my skill, but my timing was off.

Dupe vanished. Thankfully, he seemed to lose track of me as well. As a result, we wound up merely trading places.

However... I had something Dupe didn't.

The question was if he noticed.

"..."

Dupe silently readied his knife. I offered out my left hand and bent my middle finger in toward me twice.

He only snorted.

Unsurprisingly, he wasn't one to give in to provocation.

Taunt, watch the opponent's eyes, observe the weight distribution between their feet, and use a feint to get in. We were both considering the same tactics.

After our exchange revealed we were an equal match, we both knew the best move was to stay put.

Our fighting styles were too similar.

For some reason, meeting an opponent who could keep up with me so well was exciting.

I took in my surroundings, getting a feel for the dilapidated structure.

"So is this whole growing-a-body-out-of-an-arm thing some new technology?"

"Feeling chatty? I know better than to answer questions."

"Of course."

The vampire Wawok controlled and amplified mana using glyphs. There were probably many breakthroughs that humans and demons were ignorant of. Finding something you were only vaguely aware of as a possibility and deducing what it was used for wasn't easy.

I had no idea how long Dupe and I fought. It felt like a minute and an hour at the same time.

"I have a proposal," Dupe offered. "How about we don't use our skill? We'll never settle this by just standing around."

And there we had it.

"Fine. I'll bite. Then neither of us will activate Unobtrusive."

The moment I accepted, we both were on the move.

I picked up a broken rod while running. However, Dupe stopped any swing I made with quick knife thrusts.

He showered me with attacks from both sides, and it was all I could do to defend myself.

One arm versus two. Even a child understood what that meant. Dupe was trying to pressure me with more strikes than I could handle.

The knives were dull and I evaded any mortal wounds, so I wasn't hurt too gravely.

It was time to call upon my secret!

A knife knocked the rod out of my hand.

Dupe suddenly disappeared.

I knew immediately that he'd used Unobtrusive.

Obviously, he never intended to honor our agreement. I didn't win battles by being gentlemanly. Fighting dirty took priority over attacking directly.

I was right to assume Dupe would only try it the moment he thought he could kill me.

Although I couldn't hear or see him, I roundhouse kicked directly behind me, putting everything I had into my strike. No one was there yet, but I was certain that was where Dupe would come from.

Right before my attack connected, I caught sight of him.

I knew it.

My heel found purchase, and Dupe went flying several meters, accompanied by a loud *whack*. He caught himself during his fall.

Attacking first was his mistake.

I grabbed the rod Dupe had knocked away and dashed for him.

This impostor knew I'd use my skill as surely as I knew he would. He broke the agreement, so there was no cause for me to hesitate.

And that's precisely what confused him.

He didn't know when I'd vanish. When I invoked Unobtrusive, he'd expect me to strike from the back.

Distracted though Dupe was by thinking about our skills, he never lost track of me.

I remained perfectly in view as I charged, never disappearing. I wasn't going to use my skill.

My plan was to attack head-on.

Dupe, unable to believe his eyes, reacted a split second too late.

But both of us could easily ward off a frontal attack from someone with our abilities and experience.

I'm sure that's what Dupe believed anyway.

However, he failed to realize that arms were heavier than people gave them credit for. I was lighter than Dupe, if only just.

By the time he moved to protect himself, I'd already thrust the broken rod into his chest.

"Urk...?!"

A couple of kilograms made all the difference, giving me those few unexpected centimeters I needed.

He must have missed that during my skill misfire at the start of the battle, I reacted slightly too quickly trying to stop him.

If I still had both arms, Dupe would have stopped my blow without any trouble.

The impostor groaned and grimaced, then triggered his skill and disappeared.

"..."

I never expected to have a literal fight with myself.

After a small exhale, I peered into the room where Rila was held.

Her cheeks were pale and her body limp. With her face lowered, she grumbled, "M-my head hurts..."

I intended to praise her for creating a shadow to lead me to her and provide hints about her kidnapper. She hardly seemed worthy of a compliment in this

state, though.

“I feel terrible...”

“Hey, Rila.” I crouched down to meet her eyes, and her shoulders flinched. “Look, it’s me. I only have one arm.”

“So it is... What trouble you’ve wrought...”

“Yes. It really was quite a hassle.”

I tried to lend Rila a shoulder, but she couldn’t stand, so I had to carry her on my back.

“Stop swaying. Stop...”

Even her complaints were weak.

“Rila, do you know what he was?”

“I do not... We do have spells that allow the creation of offshoots. However, the caster must also be the source, and I do not believe you are responsible.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever heard of magic like that.”

“Mm-hmm. Thus, regrettably, I can only guess at the culprit.”

“What we do know for sure is the fake me assassinated the king. Then he kidnapped you and fought me.”

“Where has the impostor gone?”

“I stabbed him in the chest with a pole, and he disappeared.”

“You truly show no mercy, even for yourself—both physically and mentally.”

“What are you going on about? I can’t show him mercy just because he’s my double. He told me he intended to take my place. If that’s true, then the assassination was a trap to lure us here...”

“That seems the most natural logic. But he could have avoided the circuitous route and simply come straight to our home.”

That had occurred to me, too.

If he only wanted to kill and replace me, why bother doing away with King Rubens?

“Why do you think he did it?” I asked.

“Hmm... I suppose it was the best way to test himself.”

“You think he did that all to check the extent of his abilities?”

“Is it not the perfect means to that end? Assassinating a king is no trivial effort. In that way, he is a legendary assassin. You arrived after catching wind of the deed, and here we are.”

“That seems just like me... I’m proud of my abilities, but he took things too far.”

“Imagine if this were to spread.”

“A major criminal killing multiple rulers would be trouble.”

I couldn’t kill Dupe if I wanted a chance at clearing up this mess. I’d need to capture him and hand him off to Elvie.

“You may need to accompany me to Hell.” Rila’s voice sounded somewhat jovial.

“Only if someone realizes ‘I’m’ responsible.”

Trying to capture Dupe would be more challenging than fighting him. It wouldn’t go as well as it did this time.

He’d undoubtedly reassessed me by now, taking into account my increased speed because of my missing limb. The same trick wouldn’t work twice.

“Do you think you can capture him?”

“I’m not sure. But...” I couldn’t hold back against someone who was an equal match for me. A little slipup, and I’d lose. “We have other options.”

“Heh-heh. I know what you’re thinking.”

My plan wasn’t tough to guess.

“Right now, it’s the best option.”

Rila wrapped her arms around my neck and squeezed in closer.

“I would not mind casting aside my name and identity to travel the world with you. However...”

“However?”

“I have taken a liking to our home.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“You would do well to devote yourself to your efforts.”

“As you wish,” I joked, and Rila laughed.

Once we made it back to Elvie’s estate, Rila was faring much better.

“I was worried about where you went,” Elvie said.

Rila and I had both left without informing the servants. Apparently, Elvie had been trying to locate us.

“Sorry. It was an emergency,” I explained.

“An emergency?”

“We’ll talk later. First, let’s have dinner.”

“I suppose we should,” Elvie agreed, and we all headed to the dining room for a meal. Once it was over, I invited Elvie to the guest room. Rila and I recounted everything that had transpired.

“Two Rolands? How could that be...” Elvie narrowed her eyes with skepticism.

“I know it seems implausible, but it’s the truth. He looked like me, thought like me during battle, and used his skill and moved like I do.”

“I suppose an impostor with your skills could slip past my guards and assassinate the king, but...” Elvie brought a hand to her chin and scowled. “Roland, what do you intend to do? If this comes to light, impostor or not, you’ll be...”

“I know. That’s why I need to capture him. He intends to replace me, so he’ll likely show up again. He might go around killing kings just to test himself.”

“Heh-heh-heh,” Rila cackled to herself as though this didn’t concern her at all. “What a troublesome man.”

“Once he’s decided to assassinate someone, no one will be able to stop him... Ugh, this is just too much to deal with!” For Elvie, leader of the castle guard, this

was the worst possible enemy to go up against. “Roland, what do you intend to do? Do you have a trick up your sleeve? You drove him off today, but there’s no telling what will happen next time...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll have a new sleeve to pull from.”

“?”

Rila seemed to understand what I was getting at, while Elvie remained stumped, mouth half open.

“I need to head out for a bit.”

“Where to?” Elvie asked, but I left the room without replying.

Rila didn’t try to follow. I guess she was looking forward to finding out if she’d guessed right upon my return.

I set up a Gate out of view on the estate and jumped to another one I’d placed a few days ago.

I moved down the underground passage toward Wawok’s studio.

“Wawok Seiv, are you here?” I called. My voice resounded through the cavern. The caged monsters responded with roars and snarls. Apparently, the vampire master of this place was preparing another shipment of glyph-marked monsters.

“Why, hello, Roland, my boy.”

I spotted the pale vampire farther ahead.

“I need a right arm.”

Wawok grinned triumphantly as soon as he heard the words.

“I knew you’d come around.”

“Just for now. Once it’s served its purpose, it could disappear for all I care.”

“Ha-ha-ha. None of my work is so shoddy as to be tossed out casually. Come.” Wawok motioned with a hand for me to follow.

He led me to another remodeled cave chamber. Books were piled high, and the ground was cluttered with discarded balls of paper. I picked one up and saw

it was covered in lines of symbols, several of which were crossed out.

“I rather thought this might happen, so I made one for you.”

“Well, that’s helpful.”

“I know men just can’t resist the desire to become more powerful.”

“I’ve already told you that’s not what this is.”

“I know, I know. It’s all in good sport. Please don’t take everything so seriously.” Wawok lifted an object off a desk. “I just enjoy developing new devices people can wear. This is what I settled on.”

At first glance, it looked like he was holding another collar. However, Wawok corrected me.

“It’s an armband. Put this on the remainder of your limb, and—”

“—it’ll make a new arm?” I finished.

“Not a bad guess! You’ll need to practice to master it.”

“Just tell me what it can do.”

“Right,” Wawok said with a nod. “With this, you’ll be able to access the memory center of your brain and make your mana manifest in specific shapes.”

“Give it to me in simpler terms.”

“The main point is that you’ll be able to construct an arm from magical power.”

“Hmm.”

“You ought to be surprised...” For whatever reason, Wawok looked disappointed. “This will require precise mana control. That’s why you’ll need practice.”

I wrapped the band around my shoulder to try it out. I made sure to pull it tight so it wouldn’t slip off even while I moved around.

This was the fruit of Wawok’s labor. It seemed fitting considering he specialized in mana suppression, control, and amplification.

“You can’t simply funnel mana into the band, you see. To make it function like

a proper limb, you'll need just the right amount."

I figured that I needed to picture something in my mind that was a little more precise than when I used Magi Raegas.

"You should try it," Wawok urged, and so I did.

I imbued the band with the necessary power...

"Don't get too down," Wawok said. "Even a demon would find this challenging."

The band glowed faintly, and something like blood vessels grew from it. They formed into an upper arm, then extended down to an elbow, a wrist, and five fingers.

Wawok blinked in surprise. "Huh?"

It was basically a limb constructed of blue blood vessels, and it was transparent because it was made from mana.

"Hmm."

I opened and closed the newly created hand. It moved exactly how I wanted. With no muscles or bones, it felt weightless.

"Wha...? It can't be. How did you do that?"

After confirming what my new arm was capable of, I returned to Wegal immediately.

Dupe was after me, so going to Rila and Elvie would needlessly endanger them. Instead, I waited for my copy at the dilapidated building.

Night was wearing on, and the moon waned.

Dupe approached me from the dark. "I'm surprised you knew I'd be here."

"There's no way I'd fail to recognize my own presence."

"I suppose you're right."

The wound I'd inflicted on Dupe wasn't fatal. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to hinder him in another fight, either.

Maintaining my new arm required mana, so I wasn't currently using the band.

Plus, it was the perfect tool to catch Dupe off guard. I'd created and dismissed the arm several times, so I could invoke it just like a skill.

"What're you after? I doubt you only want my life."

"You know I won't tell you."

Creating a whole person from an arm changed the definition of what it meant to be dead. I had no idea whether this was happening somewhere else or if I'd been specially selected for the first attempt.

The possibilities created endless questions, but Dupe wasn't going to give anything up no matter what torture I subjected him to.

"You enjoyed today's battle, didn't you?" I said.

Dupe grinned. "You could tell?"

"Of course. I enjoyed it, too."

Since our fighting styles were identical, the only option was to fight using every possible advantage—over and over. We each canceled out the other's strengths while trying to retaliate with our own. It demanded intense concentration, and as a result, was more mentally stimulating than usual.

Dupe produced a knife from his breast pocket. It looked cheap, but considering our capabilities, it was more than sufficient.

"I waited for you and you've come empty-handed?" He sneered.

"I'm still my own best weapon. I don't choose my tools, location, or target."

"You'll come to regret that soon enough."

I laughed. I'd heard that line from a few people in the past.

Dupe invoked his skill.

There was no telling if he understood why I laughed as I activated Unobtrusive in response.

Our skills weren't suited to this sort of duel. In the end, we traded places, just like last time.

Drawing closer without using Unobtrusive, Dupe swung his knife, the blade

flashing silver. I dodged it by a hair, but he was already thrusting at me with a blade in his other hand.

Evidently, he intended to rely on that advantage again.

I evaded both knives, waiting for an opening, then kicked Dupe. He blocked, but the unusual method of attack caught him slightly off guard.

“‘You’ll come to regret that soon enough...’ How could you utter such a cheap line?”

Dupe’s eyebrows twitched in irritation, and he hurled a foot at me, as though to mimic my blow. I focused on evasion and blocking, kicking at the impostor to keep him in check. Neither of us got a clean hit in.

“Knowing our skill won’t be effective, we have only one choice, which makes things simple,” I said. Dupe didn’t reply, though, preferring to strike again.

That demonstrated the difference in our abilities.

My style never was to attack repeatedly.

I believed in one-hit kills.

When I struck, it meant the fight was over, whether it was with a knife or empty-handed. That’s how most of my fights went. I hardly ever resorted to exchanging blows with opponents. In all my memory, I only did that with Amy and a handful of others.

As I watched Dupe and maintained my composure, I realized how unaccustomed to drawn-out fights we were.

Initially, he employed a range of attacks, but as time wore on, he lost finesse and resorted to easily read maneuvers.

He aimed a knife at my feet, then at my neck, then made a stab with the other knife.

My opponent’s moves fell into a predictable pattern.

“Dupe, I’m going to show you something you’ll never see coming for the second time.”

I imbued the armband with mana and instantly reformed my lost limb.

“—!”

The faker hardly had time to look surprised before I punched him in the face. When my mana-fist connected with the bridge of his nose, I threw my other fist into his abdomen.

Dupe doubled over and collapsed on the spot.

“The unexpected can happen at any moment.”

“Guh!”

He had to understand the tide had turned against him. He activated Unobtrusive and vanished.

Evidently, he’d decided this was a loss and that it was better to retreat. However, I couldn’t allow him to escape.

I wasn’t the kind of person who permitted a target to slip through my fingers twice. I guessed his route of retreat perfectly and caught him by the back.

“Whenever someone tells me I’ll regret something, they end up being the one with regrets.”

“Tsk!”

Dupe was injured, but I couldn’t afford to show him mercy. Regardless of his appearance and abilities, he was a criminal in Rubens.

“Can I use it like this?”

“Oh! Oh-ho! What a great idea! Yes, you can!”

Wawok had given me his seal of approval to use my new arm for a certain kind of attack.

I triggered my skill and fed more mana into a part of my arm, firing a blue-white bullet from my right wrist.

It made a pleasing sound upon impact with Dupe’s back, knocking him a few meters away.

The bullet was pretty quick; excellent, even. Still, something at that speed shouldn’t have caught “me” so easily.

“I didn’t think you’d take the hit, even while turned away from me,” I said to Dupe.

Then something occurred to me, and I looked at my missing right hand.

Unobtrusive extended to all of me.

Apparently, even when I fired off a part of myself, the skill’s effect persisted, making the shot impossible to perceive for a few moments.

“So I’m a projectile weapon now, too... Interesting.”

Regaining my arm had unintentionally made me stronger.

“There really are two Rolands...”

I dragged Dupe back to the estate while he was unconscious, and Elvie looked between us several times. Then I tied Dupe up with some rope Elvie brought for me. I made sure the knots were secure, so he wouldn’t be able to escape.

“He’s the culprit behind the king’s assassination. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“I understand. I’ll make preparations to throw him in the dungeons immediately.”

“If he is as capable as the knave, do you not think he will immediately escape?”

“I’m not very good at dealing with physical restraints. If you put shackles and handcuffs on him and throw him behind bars, he’ll have a tough time getting out,” I said.

“Coming from you, that has to be the truth. Still, I’d like you to inspect everything, including the guards and surveillance measures,” Elvie replied.

“Isn’t that your job?”

“But...”

Elvie lost all confidence when dealing with me.

“All right... I’ll check later.”

“Thank you.”

Elvie hurried off and had a servant bring her favorite horse. The paladin rode

off for the castle.

Rila cast a sleeping spell on Dupe for good measure.

“He is quite well constructed. Are you sure he hasn’t merely assumed your form?”

“No. He definitely used Unobtrusive.”

“...I suppose you are right. When this man used his skill before me, I recalled our battle in the demon lord’s castle.”

I sat down on top of Dupe, who was lying on the ground.

“The arm you used as a back scratcher disappeared, and then he came along.” I slapped Dupe on the head. He showed no signs of waking. “He said that he came from the arm itself. I guess it could’ve been a lie, but...”

“There may yet be a technique of achieving this feat that is unknown to the both of us... I believe that to be the most natural assumption to make.”

It felt like Rila and I were going around in circles as we talked.

“If only he’d tell us...but that seems unlikely.”

Earlier, we’d roused Dupe and tried all kinds of magic on him at Rila’s suggestion, yet none of it worked.

Only the sleeping spell had any reliable effect.

“Spells can’t get him to talk, I guess.”

Rila sighed. “Perhaps that sort of magic cannot affect him.”

Demon spells were far more advanced than human ones, even down to the systematic level. And if Rila, who was the epitome of the demon world, couldn’t achieve something, then it was impossible for a human.

“We must find out how your impostor came to be and why he sought to supplant you.”

Rila and I were left with a heap of questions and not one answer.

After a while, Elvie returned to inform us she’d finished making arrangements. I handed the still-unconscious Dupe over and went to examine

the dungeon where he'd be kept.

One of Elvie's people took me to the castle basement. Once the person set a candlestick on the wall, I had a full view of everything.

There was only one jail cell. Dupe would have the entire floor to himself—more lavish treatment than I expected.

"There won't be anyone monitoring him. We will only come down to give him food. The person in charge of that will change each day. It'll also be irregular. We thought it might be best to keep interactions with him to a minimum. What do you think?"

"Hmm. That's for the best, since he might try to manipulate people through conversation."

""Can he really...?""

Rila and Elvie both looked exasperated.

"In order to do that, he'd require time and a personal relationship with the person. You'll need to ensure he's denied both. I'm sure that won't be a problem for you, Elvie."

Elvie's subordinates shackled Dupe's hands and feet. There were chains attached to the bindings, so his arms were always pulled taut. Next, he was blindfolded and gagged, both tied behind his head.

"These bars are made from magic-resistant material. We only learned this after the fact, but skills do not work on this metal," a guard reported after opening the cell.

"This dungeon was created specifically to hold special people," Elvie summarized. "It's basically the reverse VIP treatment."

Rila attacked the bars as a test, and they didn't so much as budge.

"Hmph. Not bad..."

I had no qualms with the facility or how it was monitored.

Barring human error, Dupe would never get out.

"We will only leave a candle here when someone comes down. Otherwise,

this place will be in total darkness. With the blindfold on, I doubt he'll see much of anything."

Without the candlestick, the passage would be pitch-black.

Once we returned to the castle proper, Elvie's subordinates returned to their posts.

We headed to a gathering room for royal guards to discuss what to do with Dupe.

"The Holy Land of Rubens wishes to execute him as soon as possible."

"Of course."

The longer they kept him, the greater his chance of escape. Holding him demanded resources and a complex procedure, too.

Rila signaled at me with her eyes. I nodded in understanding.

"I'd like to know what he is and why he exists," I said.

"What good will that do?"

"This is an achievement beyond both demons and humans. He claims he was created from my arm."

Elvie objected. "What nonsense!"

"One would think... But he has the same skill I do, and he moves and thinks in battle as I would. You saw his face, didn't you?"

"Well, yes..." Elvie remained reluctant to accept the idea.

Rila spoke for me. "It is conspicuous that his arm was chosen for this process."

"But who made that call in the first place?" Elvie wondered.

"If we knew that, we would not be in such dire straits. A look-alike body identical to the original created from a preserved arm. Do you understand what that means, Goody Two-shoes? An entire person might be replicated from a single hair."

I nodded. "Resurrecting previous heroes and demon lords is now a possibility."

“What...would you have me do?” Elvie asked.

“I’d like you to torture him over time. One method in particular should work. It’s worse than anything I’ve ever experienced,” I replied.

It happened during an assassination. I infiltrated a place as a prisoner, and was thus subjected to torture.

“I was great at withstanding pain, so they left me in darkness. I have no idea for how long. Time’s passing lost meaning, and I was continually starved. It left me in a horrible state. But there was a jailer who came to give me a sip of water once in a while. He greeted me very plainly, and sometimes even spoke with me. There were also days when he said nothing. Being in the dark, without light, without sound, without any warmth...it messed with my head. Amid all that, the guard felt like an angel. He didn’t ask me anything, either. That was the torture.”

“So... What happened?” Elvie pressed, curious.

“I almost talked. I almost told him who I was, why I was there, and who I needed to kill. All because I thought he’d return if I did. I began to value the man’s interest in me more than my work. That’s what the process did to me.”

Later, I discovered this practice was implemented because of a rumor that a prisoner had a secret fortune stashed somewhere. They revealed the location of that treasure before I exposed my goal to the guard, and I was released.

That prisoner had actually been my target.

“So we don’t need to make him talk. Rather, we just need an environment where he wants to talk,” Elvie concluded.

“Exactly. As long as you’re fine watching and looking after him. We couldn’t get anything out of him with magic, so this is the only route left.”

“Hmm...” Elvie didn’t seem very enthusiastic.

Rila had a nasty-looking grin on her face. “Oh, perhaps... You believe yourself incapable of doing such a terrible thing to one who resembles Roland... Is that correct?”

“Er...”

She hit the bull's-eye. Elvie's face turned red.

"Wh-wh-why of course! He looks just like the person I overcame so many hardships with. It would be one thing if they were different on the inside, but Roland says this impostor is the same... I just can't help but harbor reservations..."

"If you can't do it, then have someone else try. It's not that difficult to become his angel."

"O-okay. We'll do it."

"Wimp."

"Sh-shut up!"

At last, we had a plan for Dupe.

Now that the assassination of King Rubens was solved, I could return to my ordinary life.

While going about my typical guild employee duties, a coworker asked me why I cut back on hours for a bit.

"I took a short trip to the Holy Land of Rubens."

At this, my colleague's eyes widened for a moment.

"Well, I guess Argan would be capable of that..."

For some reason, a lot of people agreed with that assessment.

"Mr. Roland, have you heard about the gossip circulating in Rubens?" Milia asked. She thought I was away on a normal trip.

"Is there some news?" I asked.

"They say the king passed away from sickness. You really heard nothing about it while abroad? An adventurer told me there was a huge funeral..."

"Oh yes... Now I remember."

According to Elvie's letter, the government made a public announcement to prevent any discord.

Just as Milia said, the public story was that the king had died of a sudden

illness.

“The announcement wasn’t made while I was there, and Wegal didn’t seem unusual,” I fibbed.

“Oh, really? I thought the funeral might’ve been a little festival or something.”

Depending on the country, burial ceremonies could range from austere to showy... I doubted any would be dubbed “little festivals,” though.

Dupe hadn’t given up anything useful yet.

A recent letter explained that I’d be kept informed, but a quiet execution would be carried out eventually.

If he realized we were trying to squeeze information out of him on a deadline, he’d never talk.

I hoped Elvie played this right.

Unless Dupe gave us something to work with, the execution would be inevitable and we’d have no leads.

I wanted information about that mysterious technology. Perhaps King Randolph knew something.

“Mr. Rolaaand? There’s an adventurer asking for you.”

“Yes, I’ll be right there.”

I stood and headed to the counter.

I decided I would stop by Wawok’s place before visiting King Randolph. The vampire insisted several times that I should check in with him after using the armband.

Wawok, perhaps impatient, showed up at my house before I’d found the right time for my trip to him and King Randolph.

“Soooo, how’d it go? Tell me.” Wawok sat across from me on a sofa and leaned his pale face in close.

I pushed him back with my left hand.

Rila and Dey were seated on either side of me.

“Don’t get too close.”

“As you wish, Roland, my lad. I just can’t help my curiosity. It’s a prototype, so I haven’t tested its performance much.”

“I’ll start from the conclusion.”

Wawok audibly gulped.

“It is entirely usable.”

“Woo-hoo!” He flung both his arms up in the air like a child.

“I wondered what the strange band was. So it is one of the devices you developed,” Rila said, nodding.

“Wellll... I don’t like it.” Dey pouted like a child as she watched Wawok celebrate. “Master Roland only needs to rely on me. I’m more than enough.”

“And I am here. I have yet to put on the collar.”

“If either of you think you won’t hold me back in the next battle with myself, then I will rely on you both,” I stated.

Rila and Dey immediately turned away from me.

“I could never. If you were facing another you... Why, I’d pee myself from the sense of your murderous aura alone...,” Dey replied.

Rila looked exasperated as Dey rubbed her knees together. “This meddlesome vampire has lived past her prime...and always seems to be in heat year-round...”

“So about that tactic you came up with, Roland—” Wawok began.

“It was immediately effective.”

“*Whew.*” Wawok whistled. His mood couldn’t have been better.

“I can’t believe such an underhanded person is useful to Master Roland... I’m so jealous.”

“What are you talking about? You’re plenty helpful, Dey.”

“Oh, you... I love you, Master Roland.”

I glanced at Rila, who let that comment slide with unusual silence. She stared into space with a blank expression. Several blue veins stood out on her temple.

“I—I could lay waste to this vampire past her prime right now.” Her voice trembled in anger. “However...I will be branded the petty one who was overcome with envy if I do...”

“You can’t, Lord Rileyla. If you use your power, it will attract a lot of bothersome visitors from Hell.”

“I am well aware!” Rila hissed, threatening to snap at Dey at any moment.

Wawok watched the exchange inquisitively.

“What is it? Looks like you have something to say,” I remarked.

“You are a curious person.” Wawok smiled awkwardly as he watched Rila and Dey glare at each other.

“I can’t believe this is what’s become of the greatest demon lord. And she’s competing with her own underling—one who isn’t even that close in the hierarchy to her.”

“It seems she doesn’t want to be the demon lord anymore. She can live as herself now. That’s probably why she seems so different.”

“And you are the one who enables her to have that life.”

“We just so happened to settle down together here.”

Wawok shrugged. “So you claim. After learning how the armband functions, you devised of a way to use it in combat immediately... You have a terrifying knack for fighting. I understand how you were able to bring down the demon lord... Although I feel you’ve made her fall in a different way since then.”

Dey kept laughing quietly to herself, shooting hostile glances at Rila, which ticked her off to no end.

In the past, Wawok had asked me if I wanted my right arm back. I hadn’t forgotten my thoughts at the time. If I could learn how to use my new arm, I’d...

Now I had a way to attack from a distance, something I always longed for but thought was impossible. Plus, with Unobtrusive, I could strike in a way even I couldn’t respond to. Learning more about this new arm would definitely make me even...

“Wawok, I would like to inquire about a certain new technology,” Rila began.

“All right. Let’s hear it.”

Rila finally put her battle with Dey on hold to ask Wawok about the other me.

“I’m afraid I don’t know about anything like that. My glyphs are the result of my own research. They’re not something that all vampires can use. You might want to consider whether you’re dealing with something similar.”

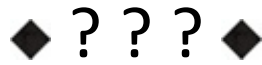
Rila sighed in defeat. “Alas, not even you have an inkling of what this might be.”

Not long after that discussion, Wawok decided to head out. “I’ll continue to make improvements. Let me know if you’d like anything specific,” he said before going.

I planned to dedicate myself to reaching heights I previously believed impossible. I had thought I’d mastered my skill, but the armband opened up new opportunities. It was possible for me to get stronger.

11

Kindling



The man confined in the castle's special underground chamber was muttering to himself.

"I know. I know. I've gone through this before. They did the same thing in that prison..."

He recalled everything until Amy cut his right arm off.

The man was blindfolded and left in the darkness. The silence of waiting, never knowing when someone might come for him, threatened to drive him insane.

Soft footsteps clacked on the floor. He sensed the faintest light through the blindfold and wished to cling to it. It was time for his hunger to be sated, at least for a little while. A soft scent wafted on the air—the smell of a woman.

He heard something like the groan of a grate opening.

The footfalls and scent grew stronger.

Ordinarily, the man wouldn't have thought much of the smell, but isolated in this special prison as he was, it felt far sharper to his senses.

"It's water. Drink it."

He could tell who had come based on her voice. She didn't remove his blindfold, presumably because she didn't want him to see her face. This woman knew the original all too well.

He opened his mouth and was fed a spoonful of water drop by drop. His mouth felt slightly less dry.

“Is that you, Elvie?”

“...”

“You don’t have to hide it. I can tell by your voice.”

“Your execution date has been decided. It’s tomorrow. You’ll die without a name, just as you should.”

“I see.”

“Listen, you only have a day, but if you answer my questions, I promise to get you food and water.”

The man hesitated. Words nearly escaped his mouth, but he shoved them into his throat.

“I’m an offshoot of Roland. I know what you two did and the sort of relationship you had.”

“You didn’t experience it, though. Those are merely facts you happen to know.”

“Hmph. You may be right.”

“If you don’t intend to tell me anything, then that’ll be all.”

A hard heel hitting the prison floor.

“There is one thing I can tell you.”

The *clacks* slowed to a stop.

“And that is?”

“We... No—the party of heroes, Roland included, defeated the demon lord, yes?”

“What of it?”

“The demon lord isn’t dead. She’s still alive.”

“Of all the things you could have said... What nonsense. We saw her corpse.”

“But you didn’t fight her. I did—Roland did. He used the magical collar from Serafin to ‘kill’ the demon lord. He... Roland allowed the demon lord to escape. She’s still alive.”

The woman didn't say anything. He assumed her silence was due to the surprise.

Her one-track mind was exactly as he remembered. He could guess what this foolishly earnest girl would do now that she had learned the truth.

The next day, the man was executed in secrecy.

It wasn't an unusual way for an assassin to spend his final moments.

His death couldn't chase his words from Elvie's mind, however. They stained her thoughts as surely as blood.

When Elvie had turned to leave the prison, knowing the man would never surrender the information Roland wanted, he'd delivered the final blow.

"She's a beautiful demon with red hair and eyes. Sound like anyone? That's the demon lord."

Afterword

Hello. I'm Kennoji.

It seems the manga adaptation of this work is doing very well. Rila, Milia, and the branch manager, Isis, are all so cute. Their faces look exactly how I imagined. I've been enjoying it, so I hope any of you who have yet to read it will take a look!

Now then, if I had to summarize Volume 6 in one succinct phrase, I'd say it's a tale about Roland getting his hands on something new that he once lost. I think the readers who finish the book will understand what I mean. Still, after all's said and done, I think it really must have been inconvenient for Roland, even though he said he was managing fine with just one arm.

Roland will continue to work hard toward his new goal in the next volume, too. I hope you're looking forward to it!

Kennoji

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